

THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

Seven-Colored
Recollections

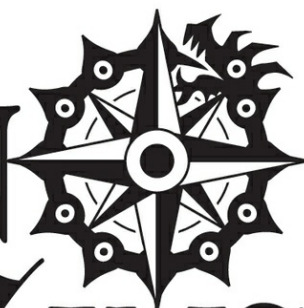


Stories by Shuka Matsuda
Created by Nakaba Suzuki

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Translated by Frank J/E Spinelli



VERTICAL.





Prologue



Rising out of the northern ocean is a large island, known as Britannia since unknown ages past.

On that island, there was a never-ending battle between a belligerent race of demons and the island's other races, revolving around the bountiful magical power of the land.

It was said that at the end of a violent battle, under the goddesses' command, the humans, fairies, and giants united to seal away the demons. And so peace finally came.

However, in doing so the goddesses lost their power as well, disappearing from the land, and the number of giants and fairies also fell drastically. As for the humans, now the rulers of the land, in exchange for their greater influence, their magical ability waned. Of those remaining who could convey that power even weakly, there were only a small number of magicians, and a group known as the Holy Knights.

Three thousand years passed and the truth of those events was lost from the memory of mankind.

Only one ancient poem remained.

When shooting stars cross and tear apart the sky, An immense threat will fall down upon Britannia.

That will be a trial fated from ancient times, And will be the omen of the start of the Holy War

Between the guide of light and the vessel of wicked blood.

At long last the prophecy had come true, and down fell a rain of shooting stars, crisscrossing and tearing apart the heavens.

The many triggers set three thousand years ago were going off one after another, and the demons, with their seal released, had been revived.

It was believed that Britannia would once again fall back to an age of bloody conflict.

However, some opposed the demons to prevent that from happening: The seven warriors, chosen by their strange fates to be known as the Seven Deadly Sins.

And the Holy Knights who gathered to fight beside them.

They threw themselves into the fray to protect their loved ones.

They kept struggling, seeking the light along a path that didn't have a one-in-a-million chance of success.

What will be told here are brief tales of the everyday lives of those heroes.

With each of their lives touched with a bit of color, this is a story of the rainbow's light.

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C A S T

BOAR HAT



Hawok & Hawok's Mama

Boar Hat's mascot.
Captain Leftovers.



Meliodas

Owner of the Boar Hat. Reviews are good, despite the terrible food.



Elizabeth

Poster girl for the Boar Hat, and Third Princess of Liones.



Ban

The fickle chef of the Boar Hat. Has good taste for cooking!

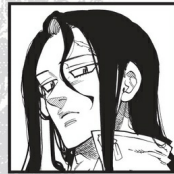
First Episode



Gowther

A member of the Seven Deadly Sins, the Goat's Sin of Lust. He lives in the village of Ordan, calling himself Armando.

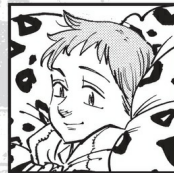
Second Episode



Slader

The captain of the Dawn Roar, an order of knights under direct command of the King of Liones.

Third Episode



King

A member of the Seven Deadly Sins, the Grizzly's Sin of Sloth. His real identity is the Fairy King Harlequin.



Diane

A member of the Seven Deadly Sins, the Serpent's Sin of Envy. A young girl of the giant race.



Helbram

He was once a close friend of King's, and a member of the fairy clan.

The First Episode

The Persistent Rainbow

Story of *Gowther*

Opening

The vast plains of Britannia shook.

It wasn't an earthquake. Earthquakes rarely occurred in this land. Moreover, the shaking was oddly rhythmic, with a beat resembling that of a drum: *Boom boom boom, boom boom*.

It had just stopped raining, so the ground and the trees of the forest were all damp. The birds and animals were finally just emerging from their rain shelters.

The vibration gradually grew stronger—*boom, boom, boom*.

At last, something appeared from beyond the hillside, its silhouette breaking apart the trees—revealing itself to be, remarkably, a single giant boar.

In size, it surpassed the elephants from the southern continent. It must have been as large as the Earth Crawler, a beast that was said to swallow even tyrant dragons whole in one bite. And the boar's body was a deep green, as if covered in moss. However, its eyes were gentle, and its mouth seemed to be smiling.

For some reason, there was what looked to be a person's house atop the boar's head.

The small building, with its orange roof that looked like a sharp pointed hat, indeed had windows and a front door. By the green wooden door on the white plaster wall were the letters *BOAR HAT*, embellished with a silhouette of a boar.

Indeed. This was the traveling tavern, the Boar Hat.

It was said to travel around Britannia while swaying atop a giant boar's head. It was a legendary pub that had been seen all around for the past ten years.

The giant boar continued to walk as the reverberations of its footfalls continued: *boom, boom, boom!* With each impact, the raindrops stuck to the leaves of the trees scattered and glistened in the sun.

“Wow...Look, everyone! A rainbow!”

A window on the first floor of the Boar Hat opened, and a girl with silver hair stuck her head out. Where she pointed, a large double rainbow hung in the sky.

“Let me see, let me see!...Oh, it’s beautiful.”

“You don’t often get to see a rainbow as clear as this.”

The next window over and the ones on the second floor opened too, and several people peeked outside.

Though the Boar Hat had formerly been managed solely by one boy, who called himself the master, it had now become quite a large family. Currently inside the pub alone there were five or six people. Including the figures on the second floor and in the watchtower, the total number of people living in the tavern seemed to exceed ten people.

“Ah, rainbows. It’s sad that they disappear so soon.”



As the silver-haired girl, Elizabeth, said this, the beautiful woman with dark grey hair standing next to her smiled. This was Merlin.

“Shall we try to make a rainbow that doesn’t disappear? That might

make for interesting research.”

At these words, spoken by Britannia’s reportedly top-ranked sorceress, Elizabeth clasped her hands in front of her chest.

“Oh, how wonderful! But—maybe rainbows are beautiful because they are short-lived.”

Just as Elizabeth said, the ends of the rainbow were already slowly growing faint.

“Maybe you’re right. It’s not like you can see them when you want to. They appear suddenly, and disappear in the blink of an eye. That might be the nature of their beauty.”

Merlin took a deep breath and her figure faded. Elizabeth could see a round transparent thing floating lightly in the air around her chest. Merlin’s soul was sealed inside this ball; the figure that people saw of her every day was something like an illusion.

“They leave an impression because they disappear. Hmm...I wonder if that’s it,” a bespectacled young man with red hair abruptly interjected from behind them. Elizabeth and Merlin, who reappeared as a solid figure, turned their heads towards him, surprised.

“Master Gowther.”

“Gowther, what’s wrong?”

Pushing up the bridge of his glasses with his right hand, the young man they called Gowther squinted at the rainbow outside the window.

“Do rainbows make you remember something special?” Elizabeth asked Gowther innocently. He replied in an indifferent tone.

“Memories are nothing more than the accumulation of information. It is true that there are times when you may observe a similar phenomenon, which becomes a catalyst that vividly revives certain memories. In those terms, right now, I certainly remembered a previous event. A recollection of a ‘persistent rainbow.’”

“Oh?”

“Oh, how interesting. I’d like to hear about it.”

“...Hear about it? Why? That story doesn’t have anything to do with the two of you.” Gowther cocked his head, puzzled.

“Well...of course, if you don’t want to talk about it, then don’t force yourself to...”

Elizabeth looked at Merlin with a troubled expression. Merlin laughed. She said: “Humans are beings that deepen their mutual understanding by occasionally talking about each other’s past experiences, and view that as proof of their friendship. It means that the princess and I want to know more about you. Well, do you find that unreasonable?”

“Hmmm.” Gowther placed his hand to his chin and thought for a while, but before long, he nodded slightly.

“Well then, let’s talk. But I don’t think it’ll be particularly interesting.”

“Oh, oh. I definitely want to hear this story,” someone suddenly said. It was a young boy with blond hair who had been standing behind them unnoticed.

“Master Meliodas!”

“Hey, everyone. Gowther says he’s going to tell us some kind of old story.”

Gazes gathered from here and there in the tavern in response to Meliodas’ call. Tired of looking at the rainbow, the people setting about arranging the alcohol bottles and cleaning the place each stopped doing their business and gathered loosely around Gowther.

“I’d love to hear Mr. Gowther’s old story.”

“When is it from? Was it before you joined the Seven Deadly Sins?”

With a slight look of surprise, Gowther looked around at the young men who were unanimously asking questions. “This is really quite interesting. Are humans really this interested in the pasts of others?”

“Is that such a big deal? So, when was this story?” Meliodas asked.

Gowther returned his gaze.

“No—it’s not such an old story. It was just recently—when I was living in the village of Ordan.”

Then he started to tell his story.

1

“Young master! Young master Pelliot!”

In the tranquil village of Ordan, where windmills turned slowly with the winter breeze blown down from the mountains, between the fields where the wheat planted in the fall had grown thick and verdant, a lone man ran along the footpaths.

“Young master Pellio~t! It’s time for your studies! Geez, I wonder where he ran off to.”

He had simple straight red hair and thick glasses. Even his gait was somehow unreliable.

“Ah, Armando!”

A cute young girl with freckles came across the path and waved at him. Behind her, a woman carrying an infant also greeted him.

“Hey, Mera! Hello to you too, madam! Your baby has grown a lot.”

Armando stopped and peered at the infant in the arms of the woman.

“Yes. Thank you. He has an incredible appetite.”

“Since mama’s breasts aren’t making enough for him, we’re going to go get goat milk,” Mera said boastfully. Embarrassed, her mother rebuked her.

“Ahaha,” laughed Armando. “By the way, have you seen young master Pelliot?”

“Pelliot? He was walking that way with Thomas and Katts. Just a little

while ago.”

“Wha-at?”

Mera pointed to the road that led to the forest to the north of the village.

“Young master!”

Tottering on his feet, Armando ran off.

Following the dusty path desperately, he saw the backs of the three boys in front of him before long.

“Young master Pelliot!!”

“Ah, it’s Armando.”

The fat boy looked back. At those words, the blond boy walking in front leading the way clicked his tongue.

“Tsk, he already found us, huh. Thomas, Katts, run!”

“What, no way.” The fat boy frowned.

“Thomas! We’ll leave you behind.”

“Go ahead.”

“Crap.”

The other two attempted to run off, leaving Thomas, who showed no signs of hurry whatsoever. But Armando caught up to them.

“Haa, haa, haa...Young master Pelliot! Thank goodness, I made it in time...”

The boy with blonde hair grumpily turned his face away from Armando, who held his arm. This was the village chief’s son, Pelliot.

“Katts, you too, let’s go home.”

“What will you give me if I go?”

The skinny, hunchbacked Katts turned his eyes up to Armando.

“S-Sure. If you ask the master, maybe some snacks.”

“Yay.”

“Traitor!”

As Thomas and Katts hurriedly started on the road back to the village, Pelliot sulked.

“All right, young master, let’s go, too. The master is waiting. Today’s the one day in ten the professor comes from the town.”

“I know, but!”

Pelliot looked towards the forest with a dissatisfied expression. But perhaps he’d given up, because he started to reluctantly walk down the path, led by Armando’s hand.

“Why did you decide to go to the forest on today of all days? You’re always told that children can’t go in there by themselves. You’ll incite the wrath of the Mountain God.”

As soon as Armando said that, they heard a roar from deep within the forest that shook the ground.

Boooooaaaagggghhhh, boooooaaaagggghhhh.

“See, it’s the voice of the Mountain God.”

“I know! But!” Pelliot stopped and looked back at the forest over his shoulder.

“...I saw a rainbow.”

“A rainbow?”

Pelliot’s gaze settled on a craggy mountain that rose up across the forest. He seemed to be looking at the mountain’s foot.

“A rainbow, over there? Even though it hasn’t rained here in quite some time?” Armando asked for more of an explanation, but with that, Pelliot hung his head, and not another word was heard from him until he returned home.

“Oh, Armando. Good job.”

When Armando brought Pelliot back home, the village chief himself opened the door and greeted him somewhat impatiently. “The professor is already here. Pelliot, go to your room.”

Pressed by his father, the boy climbed the stairs with an unhappy look on his face.

“Armando, could you clean up the barn out back? Yesterday I noticed a hole in the roof. Some water blew into it during the heavy rains last month, and the things stored there are almost ruined.”

“All right.”

“I’ll call a craftsman before long and have him fix the roof, but for now, please take out anything that appears to be damaged.”

“Understood.”

Armando headed towards the barn.

“Speaking of which, I’ve never been inside here before,” he mumbled to himself as he opened the poorly fitting door and set foot inside.

The air was stuffy with the reek of mold. There was also the smell of old books and dust.

A normal person would only have noticed those smells. However, Armando’s special senses also caught a faint aroma hanging further within the air.

“Isn’t that the smell of perfume and cosmetics?”

Without hesitation, Armando walked into the dim, narrow barn, with messy piles of things littering the interior.

“Hmmm...the hole in the roof must be over there.”

A band of light shone through the seams of the roof boards, illuminating the dust dancing in the air.

“The things underneath there certainly have traces of having been wet. I suppose I should take out the things from around there.”

The aroma from before rose up again. Looking for its source, Armando drew near the shelves along the wall.

Several beautifully ornamented wooden boxes were lined up on the shelves.

“Clothing boxes. That one’s cosmetics—it must have been one of Pelliot’s mother’s.”

Armando had heard that the lady of the house passed away from an illness shortly before he had arrived. These must be the possessions she had left behind.

They must have been hidden in the barn for Pelliot’s sake. The boy still deeply missed his mother. Armando also understood that the reason they hadn’t been thrown away was because of the village chief’s love for his wife.

“Fortunately, they do not appear to be damaged...oh?”

Armando looked at a small chair in front of the shelves.

“This is the only place where the dust pattern is different.”

It was as if someone had been sitting there sometimes.

Armando folded his thin, tall body in half and peered at the bottom shelf in front of that chair.

“A book. No, perhaps a diary.”

He looked over the stack of old paper.

“Well, it’s not a diary. This is...a story?”

Moving his face closer, he scented the same faint perfume as from the wooden box.

3

Boooooaaaagggghhhh, boooooaaaagggghhhh—

Armando walked through the forest where the Mountain God's voice reverberated.

It was a late night with no moon. In the pitch-black surroundings, Armando advanced with his distinctive gait into a darkness so pure one couldn't even see their own fingertip stretched in front of them.

"...*He* is calling me. I need to hurry."

Climbing steep, boulder-covered slopes and stepping over twisted tree roots, Armando hurried to the foot of Ordan Mountain deep within the forest.

After jumping over a stream and climbing over fallen trees, he finally reached the entrance to a large cave.

"Hey!"

Armando called into the cave—and he heard a response of *boooooaaaagggghhhh*.

Then—the *thump, thump* of heavy footsteps.

Before long something emerged from within—a giant covered entirely in armor.

"Sorry I'm late. Today the young master just wouldn't go to sleep." Armando spoke in a tone and manner quite different from the way he addressed Pelliot.

He walked up to the giant that looked to have twenty-some odd feet and placed his hand on the front of his armor without any fear.

"Gow-, -ther..."

He heard a low mumble come from within the armor. It certainly resembled the Mountain God's bellow, but the faltering tone seemed more like that of a small, frightened child.

"Gowther..." the giant called Armando.

Indeed. The young man known as "Armando" was only Gowther's assumed identity.

“Gowther...I’m scared.”

“What are you afraid of? Nothing’s going to come here.”

Armando-Gowther surveyed the surroundings slowly.

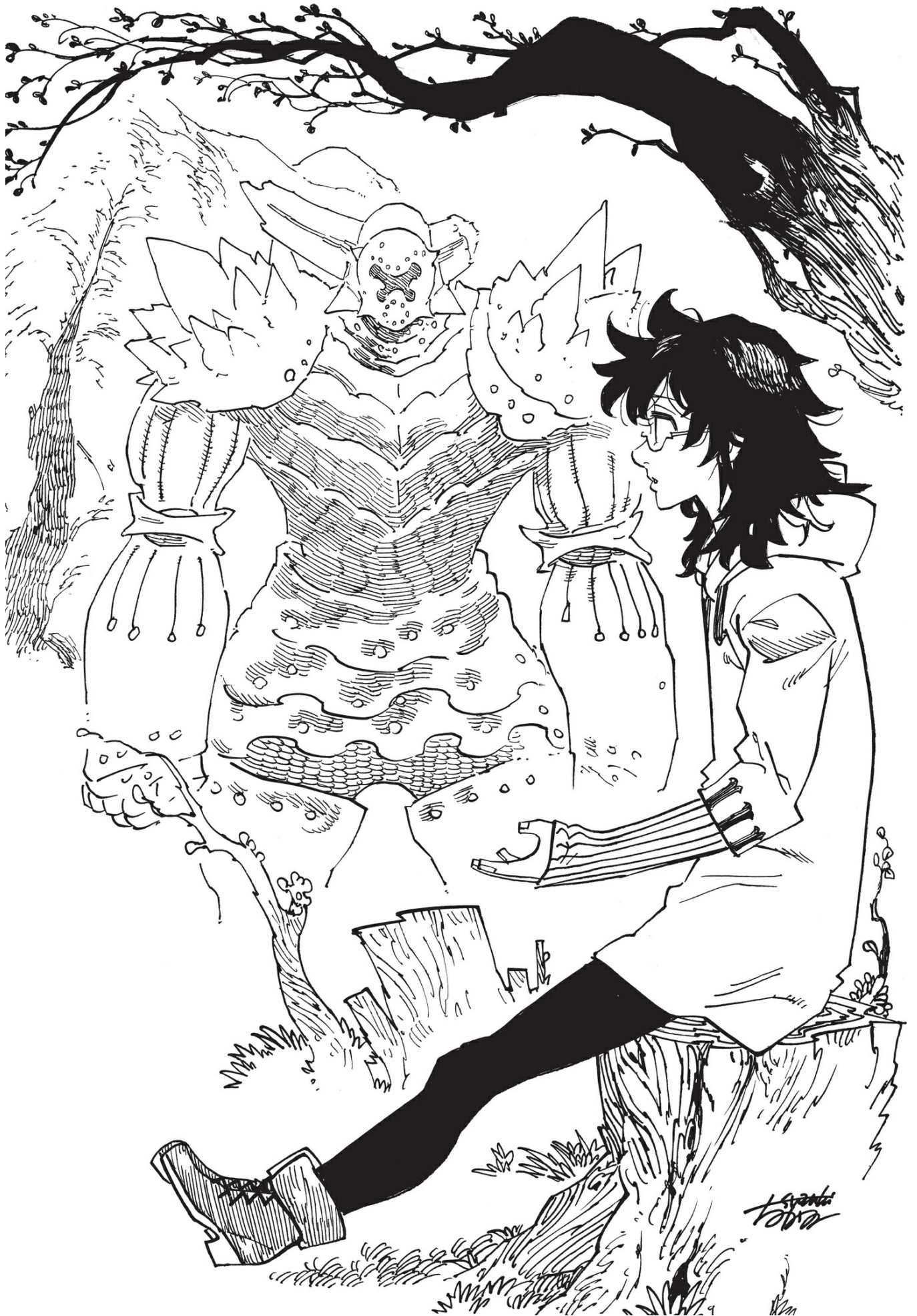
“The wolves and bears are frightened away by your voice and disappeared from this area a long time ago. Because of me, the villagers of Ordan think what they hear are the roars of the Mountain God. Because of my magic Invasion, planting this idea in their minds was no trouble at all. There shouldn’t be anyone coming around here.”

“Gowther...I’m lonely.”

“Lonely? That’s a problem. I’m busy with Pelliot during the day, after all.”

“Pelliot...”

Gowther sat down on the root of a large tree near the entrance of the cave and made himself comfortable.



“All right, then. We can talk for a bit, until dawn, anyway.”

The Armor Giant lumbered to sit down across from him.

“How is...Pelliot?” the giant asked. Gowther nodded.

“Yeah. He’s fine. You always ask about Pelliot, huh.”

“I do...I want to see him.”

“See Pelliot? No way.”

“I want...to see him...” the giant moaned.

“You understand, you’re not human anymore. You can’t show yourself to people. There’d be an uproar if someone finds you. And it’d make problems for me, too.”

“I want to see...Gui-, -la...Ze-...-al.” The giant held his head and moaned.

“I see. So it’s not really Pelliot you want to see. It’s someone who is special to you—a family member, or a friend. If Pelliot makes you think of them, it must be a child.”

“A child...”

The giant said no more, only moaned painfully.

“...Can’t remember?” Gowther breathed out heavily and looked up at the heavens. Through gaps in the tree branches, he could see the star-filled sky, which looked like a sprinkling of silver sand.

“I can’t say I understand. Memories of loss, people I miss—I don’t have any of those. I’ve been sheltering you and staying with Pelliot only because I’ve learned before that’s what a *person with a soul* would probably do,” Gowther murmured to himself. In a blank voice. With emotionless eyes.

“What exactly makes a person a person? Even though you’re like that now, you seem to have memories and feelings. I told you a second ago that you were no longer human. But because you have those memories, those feelings, maybe you are still one after all...”

He breathed out heavily again.

“I’ve heard Pelliot lost his mother quite young. He doesn’t have any specific memories of her. But even so, he yearns for her. I don’t really understand what loneliness is. I tried to imitate the hairstyle of the lady

from her portraits in the house, thinking it might make him feel even a little better, but he doesn't seem to have noticed. Maybe it's because I'm a man. Since that's how I was made, I can't change it. I can change the color of my skin and my hair, but I can't change that. Though if it were possible, I'd like to try being a girl too."

"..."

Gowther seemed to be speaking more to himself than to the Armor Giant. However, the giant listened to him in silence.

"Some of Pelliot's mother's things were in the village chief's storehouse. I found something like a diary, so I read it to learn about the lady's time while she was alive, but it wasn't a diary. It was more like a fairy tale."

"...Fairy, tale?"

"Yes. I don't know if it was an old Britannia legend, or if it was some writer's invention, or if it was something the lady made up to read to Pelliot. It was just a childish story: When a rainbow bridge crosses the sky, you can meet the person you miss underneath."

"...Rainbow."

"That's right. Have you ever heard of that legend?"

Like a child, the giant tilted his helmet with the broken ornamental horn on the left and hung his head. He looked like he was thinking.

"..."

But only a low groan slipped from his mouth.

"I see. So you don't know it."

Gowther sighed again, and then stood up.

"I have to head back soon. You should go to sleep, too. Unlike me, you still need your sleep, right?"

"...Mmmm..."

The giant stood up slowly.

"Good night."

“Good night...Gowther.”

The giant reluctantly lowered his head, then lumbered back into the cave.

4

“You can meet the person you’ve been missing under the rainbow? Hmm, can’t say I’ve heard of that one.” Mera shook her head.

Armando shrugged. “I see. Well, that means it’s not some traditional village story, I guess.”

“I don’t think so...right, Mama?”

Mera looked up at her mother beside her. The woman sitting in the rocking chair holding an infant in her arms bowed her head to Armando apologetically.

“That’s right, I’ve never heard about it either...Sorry I can’t be of much help.”

“No...I apologize for intruding and asking such weird questions.” Armando smiled as he ruffled up his unkempt hair.

“Mr. Armando, how about staying for tea? Today’s your day off, isn’t it? Young master Pelliot has been studying with the professor since yesterday, right?” the woman said, standing up.

Armando hastily waved both his hands in a flutter. “No, I’m sorry, the professor will be leaving once he’s finished his lunch. I have to head back soon, too.”

“You have a hard job, huh.”

“Haha. I’m used to it, though.”

Bobbing up and down as he walked like a clown, Armando exited Mera’s house.

I’ve lived in this world for a long time and I’ve heard various tales

from all over, but I can't remember any stories like this one, so someone must have made it up. And recently, too—in that case, I guess there probably isn't any foundation for it.

Armando placed his hand on his chin and pondered this while following the road to the village chief's house.

The second half of the text was written pretty messily. Maybe the lady wrote it while she was ill. Perhaps she wrote down something she remembered hearing before, or maybe she made it all up—humans sure are interesting. Even on the brink of death, they try to tell made-up stories.

Yesterday, Pelliot said that he saw a rainbow.

Judging from the dust on the chair in the barn, Pelliot must have been the one reading that book. And then, having seen that rainbow at the foot of the mountain, he tried to go down there.

I wonder why there was a rainbow without any rain. But it might have been a misunderstanding of some kind. I'll have to tell Pelliot that what he saw wasn't real.

Anyway, even though the wolves and bears are gone, there are still many dangerous places in the forest. And above all else, there's no knowing what would happen if he were to come across the Armor Giant.

"He" has been rather unstable over the past few months...The seal must be weakening. It was originally made for me, after all. Or maybe the seal would always have worn down with time...

Armando-Gowther recalled the first time he met him.

Originally, that armor had belonged to Gowther.

While he had been in the capital as one of the Seven Deadly Sins, the order of knights under direct command of the King, his magician friend Merlin had made the armor for Gowther to seal his powerful magic from running wild. Until coming here, he had always worn it.

Then, framed for a crime he didn't commit, he left the capital and

reached the forest of Ordan in the course of his wanderings. It was then that Armando met *him*, who like himself, was also running from *something*.

He always looked like he was afraid of something and about to cry, even though his body was like that of an unsightly, swollen monster and possessed a terrible strength that could kill a bear in one hit.

But Gowther could sense, from a weak scent wafting from the magic's depths, that *he* probably used to be a human.

Even Gowther, however, who had the power to see through a person's soul, could no longer see into *his*. However, from the intense feelings of fear and regret that reared up, Gowther knew that *he* had originally been an honest man, with a heart of justice and order.

Currently, Britannia was split up into several countries, large and small, each armed with Holy Knights—knights possessing magical powers. *He* must once have been a Holy Knight from one of those countries.

But why had *he* turned into such a monster? Perhaps it was a curse, or maybe some wicked sorcerer had used *him* as a human guinea pig.

Whichever it may be, it probably wasn't something that *he* had desired.

A monster created by people.

When Gowther thought that, for some reason, he didn't want to kill *him*.

Gowther himself did not quite understand the reason why.

Instead, he gave *him* his own armor and sheltered the once-man deep in the forest. Then he decided to call himself Armando and played the role of the village chief's son's guardian.

Perhaps the end of all that is approaching.

He wondered what kind of feelings a real human would have on such an occasion.

Behind his glasses, Gowther closed his eyes—then, putting on Armando's expression once again, he quickened his pace towards the

village chief's house.

Then—

“What’s that?”

“A rainbow?!”

Two farmers watering the field facing the side of the road suddenly looked up in the direction of the forest and shouted.

“...?!”

Armando looked in the direction they pointed.

“That’s...”

A rainbow spanned across the forest of Ordan.

But it was clear it wasn’t a natural rainbow.

It was very distinct, as though the seven colors were glowing independently, rather than being a refraction of some other light.

“Ooh. There it goes.”

Before long, the rainbow gradually shrank from its left side and disappeared among the trees as if it had been soaked up.

“What—what was that?!”

Armando looked back at the farmers. Both of them shook their heads again and again, flabbergasted.

“I have no idea, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Maybe it’s a sign from the Mountain God?!”

“...”

That must have been the “rainbow” that Pelliot saw yesterday, too.

I didn’t sense anything magical about it. But, it was clearly abnormal.

I have to make sure Pelliot doesn’t go running after it again. And I have to ascertain what the true nature of that rainbow is, and if it’s dangerous, eliminate it.

Armando let his face shift back into Gowther's for an instant, and he kept his golden eyes behind his glasses on alert, expressionlessly. After that, he broke into a run with noisy footfalls.

But he was just a step too late.

Opening the door to the village chief's house, Armando found it strangely deserted.

At this time, Pelliot's tutor should have been eating lunch. The village chief and Pelliot would have joined him, and Armando should have heard their voices.

But there were no signs of anyone in the living room, where the stove was, or in the dining room in the back.

"It can't be..."

Then a voice from upstairs called out to Armando, who stood bolt upright in the entrance.

"Oh hey, Armando. Where have you been?"

Standing on the landing, the village chief looked down at Armando absentmindedly.

"Master! Has the professor already left?"

"Yes. He said he was going to leave a bit early today. We gave him a packed lunch."

"Then—the y-young master?"

"He said he would escort him to the edge of the village. He should be back soon." Having said this, the carefree chief disappeared back onto the second floor.

"Young master...young master Pelliot!" Shouting his name, Armando once again tumbled out the entranceway.

5

Deep within the cave, *he* slowly awakened.

“Uuuughh...uuuughh...”

It felt like *he* had been dreaming.

It had been a warm, kind dream.

He was laughing, and surrounded by many people.

There were the smells of a great feast and liquor. Bright lights.

Tables lined up in rows. Tankards smacked together over and over again.

“For the king! For Liones! Cheers! Cheers!”

He too raised a tankard and cheered in chorus.

“The eyes see through evil! The mouth speaks truth! The spirit filled with justice! The sword breaks evil!”

Cheers, cheers!

A dream of bright days.

But *he* no longer even understood the meaning.

Another place. A sunny garden. Flowers in full bloom.

A young girl and a newborn infant looked up at *him* and smiled.

He reached out to hug them, but *his* hand passed through the air.

The illusion disappeared.

“Gui-, -la...Ze-...-al...”

The words flowed out of *his* mouth. Someone’s name. An important name.

“Want...to meet...”

What? Who? Even *he* didn’t know.

He stood up vacantly, and headed to the cave’s exit.

Rays of noon sunlight shone through the tips of the evergreens’ branches.

“Hmm?”

He emerged from the cave and squinted at the sun.

And then saw a rainbow.

A shining band of seven colors rose from the foot of the towering mountain.

For a time, it fluttered and swayed like a cloth. Then it disappeared, rushing up towards the heavens.

“When a rainbow bridge crosses the sky, you can meet the person you miss underneath.”

Gowther’s words from last night rose up in the back of *his* mind.

That Gowther had also said it was a childish fairy tale, or some writer’s make-believe, *he* had already forgotten.

But the words *“you can meet the person you miss”* remained engraved inside *him*.

“Uuuugh...uuuughh.”

“Meet,” *he* moaned again.

He started slowly walking off in the direction the rainbow had disappeared.

Pelliot stamped through the forest, panting for breath.

At least this time, he had entered the forest without Armando finding out. He shouted in his mind, *How do you like that?*

He's always, always getting in my way.

He nimbly hopped along the rocks, brushing away the vines and dead grass with a stick he had picked up.

“When is he going to stop treating me like a child! I’m different from when we took him in!” Pelliot griped.

He could remember the day several years ago when they first found Armando, collapsed and bloody on the outskirts of the village, and took him back to their house. But he didn’t quite understand exactly what happened afterwards that had led to Armando becoming his guardian.

At any rate, before he knew it, Armando was always by his side, and always meddling.

When he had been young enough to need help changing clothes, Pelliot was utterly dependent on him, but recently Armando had been really irritating, always following him around crying *young master, young master*.

In the tiny village of Ordan, every day was boring.

Adults who knew him since the day he was born. Every day and the next ceaselessly unchanging. And whenever he tried to even just head into the forest, Armando always stopped him.

It was during one of those times that he had found that stack of papers in the barn.

Pelliot knew right away that it was something his mother had left behind.

And then—he remembered.

The lullaby his mother sang while she held him on her knee when he was very young. And her voice while she read him picture books.

Even after being confined to bed from illness, whenever he crawled into her bed she would smile and tell him various stories.

And among those stories—he had the feeling he’d heard that one too.

“When a rainbow bridge crosses the sky, you can meet the person you miss underneath.”

A person far, far away from you. Even someone who had passed away.

“So Pelliot, when you see a rainbow, please remember your mama.”

Rainbows appear far off in the sky after rain, and disappear within moments.

So it’s impossible to go directly underneath one.

But yesterday, Pelliot had seen one.

A distinct rainbow band rising straight up out of the forest.

As though it were right there. Like a bridge that you could hold onto.

It must have been the rainbow his mother had told him about.

If he went to it, he was sure he would meet his mother again.

Pelliot tripped over a pile of damp dead leaves and fell down. Since it was a rocky landscape, there were bare rocks sticking out here and there, and his fall seriously hurt.

“...!” He raised his head with tears in his eyes.

Then he saw the rainbow rise up.

Just beyond the grove up ahead, soundlessly.

A shining, continuous band of seven colors wider than the breadth of a grown man stretching out both arms danced upwards towards the sky.

“?!”

But that *rainbow* gradually diminished—its width became narrower, and soon, showing a triangular, sword-like tip, it smoothly disappeared.

“Wh-What was...that...”

Pelliot sank onto his butt and stared at the place where the rainbow had just disappeared, his mouth wide open.

“That’s not a rainbow.”

It had definitely shone with the seven colors of a rainbow. But after having seen it closely...

“It’s not...a cloth, either. Somehow...it was thicker.”

And there had been that tapered point at the end.

“It had some kind of thin border...I think.”

Then, the direction of the wind suddenly changed. A strangely lukewarm breeze blew from the direction where the rainbow had disappeared.

“...?!” Pelliot instinctively covered his nose and mouth with his hand.

A terrible fishy reek hung in the air.

“Like dried fish...”

It smelled like the dried fish and salt picklings which merchants along the ocean far to the west of the village sometimes came to sell.

Pelliot didn’t really like that distinctive odor.

He shuddered.

It wasn’t a smell that naturally occurred in the middle of this forest.

Unlike the fresh scent of the conifers and the damp odor of the dead leaves—it was a fundamentally different smell.

“Eeeek!”

Pelliot suddenly became frightened, and clambered to his feet unsteadily. Favoring his scraped knees, he tried to return down the path he had come.

“Huh?!”

A breeze reeking of fish blew into his face again, this time from his left.

Timidly, he looked in that direction.

With a swoosh a *rainbow* crossed right before his eyes.

The rainbow—or rather a band of seven shining colors—streamed from left to right, weaving its way through the grove about only fifteen feet in front of him.

No. It would be more accurate to say that it was *swimming*.

Inspected closely, only the top red band and the bottom purple band in the long, long rainbow belt undulated. The thing *swam* through the air by moving those two.

The band moved outside of Pelliot's field of vision in an instant and vanished into the depths of the forest on his right. As he'd seen, its tail was a straight, tapered triangle.

It was something long and smooth, like a snake— “A fish? Like a mud eel...” Pelliot recalled the large, slimy fish he sometimes saw in puddles of mud in the summer.

But that thing is rounder...

No, that wasn't the main issue. First of all, no eels were that enormous, and secondly, they didn't float in the air. This was impossible not just for eels, but also for other fish.

“It's a monster!”

Pelliot finally came to his senses and ran off on unsteady feet.

He dashed down the slope, sliding on the rocky surfaces and tripping on the piles of dead leaves. He had to make it back to the village somehow. He had to go where there were people.

“Eeek!!”

Suddenly—right before his eyes.

A face appeared.

A face with enormous, glittering silver eyes, without eyelids, that stared down at Pelliot from mid-air.

“Ick...”

At first, only the lower jaw and its mere holes of a nose stood out fearsomely. Then the sharp teeth springing tightly upward. The mouth looked like it split to the very back of the eyes.

As he'd thought, it was the face of a fish.

It had a mouth that could swallow Pelliot whole, and its rainbow-colored body continued on and on behind eyes that were each as large as Pelliot's head. The thing's tail was hidden deeper within the forest and was no longer visible.

A purple pectoral fin sprouted near where the mouth ended. Smooth fins spreading out in a wide fan about four inches on both sides of its body undulated back and forth.

"Ahhh, stop it...stay away...Please stay away."

On the verge of tears, Pelliot stepped back, trying to escape from that enormous encroaching face. But paralyzed with fear, he tottered and crumpled to the ground.

"Don't come any closer...Nooooo!"

He grasped a small stone that his hand brushed, and threw it weakly at the thing's face. The stone traced a wobbly arc and grazed the monster fish's right fin before falling.

Its huge eyes shone and stared at him.

The monster opened its mouth. The bright red chasm opened to double the size of its face, its teeth forming rows upon rows inside.

"Eeee!"

It was all over. Pelliot resigned himself. He squeezed his eyes shut. He was going to be eaten.

Why did I come to a place like this?

Did I really want to meet my mother?

Maybe I just wanted to show up Armando.

It's too late for regrets now.

“Save me, Armando!”

Just as Pelliot cried out, he heard an echo:

Boooooaaaagggghhhh...

It was the voice of the Mountain God.

“...!!”

When he opened his eyes, the monster fish’s face was no longer there. Without his noticing, it had retreated away from him—and was continuing to in a rush.

Pelliot couldn’t understand what had happened.

Several seconds passed before he realized it wasn’t that the monster fish had drawn back, but rather that something had grabbed hold of it and was dragging it away.

A giant in dull purple armor stood near a large tree a little off in the distance. It held the monster fish’s body in both arms and was trying to spin it around with all its strength.

However, the monster fish wasn’t so easily captured. It wriggled its long body back and forth, trying to shake free of the giant’s arms.

“Gah...Gah, gah...”

The giant dug its fingers into the monster fish’s rainbow body. Green blood spurted out. The monster fish squirmed violently and tried to wrap itself around the giant.

“...!”

The tail of the struggling monster fish came flying towards Pelliot at a terrible speed.

He steeled himself to be hit, but before he knew it he was floating through the air.

“!”

Someone was carrying Pelliot and had sidestepped the blow.

“Young master! Are you okay?!”

“Armando!”

The bespectacled servant looked at Pelliot and smiled.

“Armando...”

In relief, Pelliot began crying about how scared he had been. Carrying the boy in his right arm and jumping back another thirty feet, Armando surveyed the monster fish running amok and the Armor Giant trying to hold it back, and pushed up the bridge of his glasses with his left hand.

“Well, this is troublesome. With *his* strength, *he* will certainly win, but having that monster’s dead body here will be a nuisance—it will rot, and the smell will most likely reach the foot of the mountain or lure other monsters to come.”

“Armando?” Pelliot looked at him uncertainly.

Armando’s speech and expression were rather different from his usual self.

“But what is that thing? There’s no corresponding creature in my database. And my Searchlight can’t make head or tails of this inferior type of animal—uh-oh.” The monster’s tail struck down nearby again. Grasping Pelliot tightly, Armando nimbly dodged the blow.

“I’m scared!”

With Pelliot shaking in his arms, Armando shouted out to the giant, “Hey! Don’t kill it!”

“Uuuugghhh...” the giant groaned, struggling against the monster wrapped around its body.

“Guess there’s no choice. Shall I give you some assistance?”

Saying so, Armando sliced his hand through the air. Some type of power shot out from the end and tore off a part of the back of the monster fish wrapped around the giant.

“Gghiii...” Hit with the external attack, the monster fish loosened its

grip. In that moment, the Armor Giant threw off the coiled-up monster fish.

The monster fish, unspooling itself completely, swam in the air around and around the grove of trees, its rainbow body madly flickering.

“Armando...”

Pelliot no longer had a clue as to what was going on anymore. He thought he was dreaming.

Still holding Pelliot, Armando danced nimbly through the air and landed near the Armor Giant. Then— “Uugghh,” the voice of the giant mumbled out from under the helmet.

“Did you say something?” Armando asked the giant.

“King’s, sash, fish.”

“King’s sash fish?” Armando tilted his head to one side.

“King’s sash fish—a king’s sash? Well, this monster does resemble one, but those fish are supposed to be silver. And they don’t grow to be that large.”



The monster fish came back to attack with a *gaarrgh*. Armando made the same motion with his hand again.

Though it recoiled and retreated, the monster fish was still going

around in circles, waiting for its next opening. The giant looked up at it and spoke with difficulty.

“Breeding season...males...kill each other...eat each other...grow bigger...rainbow-colored.”

“The rival males grow bigger during the breeding season by eating each other”? That’s the first I’ve heard of that. Then the rainbow colors on this body must be nuptial coloration. In order to attract a female?”

“Armando, what are you talking about?”

Armando raised his left hand high while fixing his hold on Pelliot. From the end of his palm, light expanded outwards, looking like a warrior’s bow.

“If that’s the case, this will be quite simple.”

Armando readied his bow of light and took aim at the monster fish, whose huge mouth was wide open, trying to attack from directly above.

“Rewrite Light,” he muttered in a low voice, and the bow drew back as if its string had been pulled. An instant later an arrow of silver light shot off.

The arrow flew into the wide-open mouth of the monster fish.

“...?”

The monster fish abruptly stopped moving.

All of a sudden, the monster fish moved its eyes as though following something. Watching whatever it was, it turned its body around and flew straight upwards to the sky.

From outside the forest, it must have looked like a rainbow soaring and disappearing into the heavens.

“What the heck was that? What did you do?” Pelliot asked timidly.

“That was a king’s sash fish—a fish from the spirit world called the king’s sash. Have you ever seen the black manta that some Holy Knights have tamed? It’s the same kind of thing, a type of fish said to be left behind in this world from back in the old days, when Britannia associated

with the spirit and fairy realms.”

“King’s...sash?”

“Once I knew it was a male in heat, it was all rather simple. All I had to do was show it an illusion of a female. It’s a base animal. It’ll chase that illusion anywhere.”

Armando gently placed Pelliot down on the ground.

“Fortunately, *he* remembered that information for us. Thank you.” Saying so, Armando looked back at the Armor Giant. But the giant had already turned its back to them and was staggering away, groaning as though he had already forgotten what had just happened.

“Hmmm. I guess it was only temporary. *He* hadn’t been able to recover any of the memories of *his* time as a Holy Knight so clearly up until now. However—it seems that Pelliot being attacked must have been the trigger. *He* seems to have had a child.”

Armando sighed, squinted his eyes, and stared at the back of the giant receding into the other side of the grove. “However, it probably won’t happen again...The effect of the seal is rapidly weakening. That may have been *his* last act as a human.”

“Armando...who...are you?”

Pelliot was suddenly frightened and took a step back. This man was different from the nagging, somewhat foolish servant that he was familiar with.

“Are you really Armando?”

“I could answer that, but there’s no point in telling you right now,” Armando said quietly. “I don’t think it’s quite time yet.”

“Wh-What are you talking about?”

Armando narrowed his eyes behind his glasses and gracefully raised his right hand. In that instant, Pelliot thought something shone brightly from the tip.

He fell unconscious.

The last thing he saw was a beautiful rainbow-colored light.

7

“Young maste~r! Young master Pellio~t! Please, slow dow~n!”

“Shut up! Stop following me!” Pelliot looked back at the servant pathetically calling his name.

“It’s almost snack time! Where are you going?”

“To Thomas’ house. A knight from the capital has come! Papa left already!”

“Ehh?”

Pelliot saw Armando making a very displeased look for no reason he could understand, and laughed scornfully.

I’m sure he’s afraid of the knight, Pelliot thought. He really is a weak coward.

The events of that day in the forest had completely vanished from his memory. To him, Armando was still the same meddlesome, incompetent fellow as always.

As the north wind blew, Pelliot sped up and ran along the footpaths of the wheat fields.

From their houses scattered around the village, other villagers were walking in the same direction as he was.

“Pelliot!” Some children of roughly the same age as Pelliot raised their hands and came over: the scrawny hunchback Katts, the only girl of the group, Mera, holding her infant brother, and Tanto, slightly younger than them and always twitching.

“Let’s go together!”

“Is the capital knight a Holy Knight?!”

“There’s no way, he’s probably just a regular knight.”

Boisterous, the children walked off shoulder-to-shoulder.

Thomas’ house was located almost in the exact center of the town, and was the only shop there. Half of the first floor was a general store, the other half a tavern. It also served as a meeting place for the villagers.

“Wow, so many people have come already.”

About a dozen villagers had gathered in the plaza in front of Thomas’ house. A thin trickle of other villagers was coming in from behind Pelliot and his friends, too. Though there hadn’t been a particular announcement, it was a rare event for a representative to come from the capital to a remote village like Ordan.

“Hey.”

The tavern door opened, and the crowd stirred.

A young knight covered in lightweight armor emerged from inside. Following him, Pelliot’s father, the village chief, also came outside.

“Hmm, there’s a lot of people gathered here...Perfect,” the knight said pompously. Then he cleared his throat theatrically.

“As I’m sure you already are aware, I am here regarding the Seven Deadly Sins, the order of knights which ten years ago slaughtered the Captain of the Holy Knights, Master Zaratras, and ran away.”

Sighs and *ohs* escaped from among some of the villagers.

“Those seven Holy Knights that were said to be the strongest and cruelest of all Britannia...”

“But didn’t they all die?”

The villagers were starting to murmur amongst themselves, and the knight recaptured their attention by clearing his throat.

“Unfortunately, their deaths have yet to be confirmed even now. However, we knights of Liones will never forgive them. Their wanted posters are renewed every year, but for several years these posters seem

not to have been delivered to this village, so I've brought the most recent ones with me here today. I've posted them on this tavern's bulletin board, so be sure to burn their images into your memories too. And if you see someone who looks even slightly suspicious, without exception, remember to send a message to the capital."

As the villagers bowed their heads and murmured their assent, the young knight nodded his head, satisfied. And then he walked off, rudely pushing his way through the crowd. The village chief hastily followed him.

After seeing him off, the villagers rushed into the tavern, each scrambling to be first. Undaunted by the adults, Pelliot also pushed his way in.

"Welcome, welcome!" Thomas' parents hollered cheerfully. Thomas stood beside them. His parents seemed to have anticipated the rush and were forcing him to help out.

In the back of the store, the space in front of the bulletin board was crammed with people. Wedging between the adults and slipping through their legs, Pelliot and his friends managed to make it to the front of the crowd.

It was a bulletin board on which announcements from the village chief, or the schedule of merchant coaches, or the shop's holidays and such were posted sporadically. Now those had all been torn off, and it was completely covered with seven brand-new wanted posters.

"So these are...the Seven Deadly Sins." Pelliot gasped.

The brutal murder of the Captain of the Holy Knights had happened before he was born. He didn't know much about it. The incident itself didn't have much to do with a remote village like Ordan, anyway, and even if the adults spoke of it on rare occasions, the story was like a distant legend that had never really struck home.

However, now, seeing the villainous-looking seven and their descriptions on the wanted posters right in front of his eyes, the fact that they were out there somewhere, even now, became clear to him.

While Pelliot gazed intently at the wanted posters, someone called out to him. It was Ben, who until recently had been working in the capital.

“Those guys, I’ve heard that each of them is monstrously strong. All of them were brutal criminals guilty of crimes so heinous that even if they died multiple times over, they could never make up for them. His Majesty the King personally scouted them from all over Britannia and organized their group.”

“Really—brutal criminals?” Mera, who had been gazing at the posters with Pelliot, opened her eyes wide.

“That’s right. And each of them was assigned a name of a *sin* from that time. This was their captain, Meliodas.” Ben pointed to the poster, hung in the center of the seven, of a man with a brazen expression. “He’s the Dragon’s Sin of Wrath. And this is Diane, of the giant clan. She’s the Serpent’s Sin of Envy.”

Ben pointed at each of the posters while talking.

Fox’s Sin of Greed, Ban.

Grizzly’s Sin of Sloth, King.

Lion’s Sin of Pride, Escanor.

Boar’s Sin of Gluttony, Merlin.

And—

“This large man in armor is Gowther, the Goat’s Sin of Lust.”

“Gowther...” Pelliot stared at the picture of the armored form, wearing a helmet with one of its horns broken off.

I think I’ve seen that somewhere?

But, no matter how hard he tried to remember, the memory would not take shape.

Pelliot shook his head. *Probably just my imagination.*

Still—

“So cool!” he couldn’t help but shout out.

Some adults sitting down at the tavern's tables, who had already distanced themselves from the bulletin board, turned their heads with a wry smile at his exclamation.

"Young master Pelliot, what are you saying?"

Armando, who had come up from behind without his noticing, stooped over and chided Pelliot. However, Pelliot shook off the hand Armando placed on his shoulder.

"They're cool! The strongest, most brutal, criminal Holy Knights in all of Britannia—amazing!" Pelliot looked up at the bulletin board once more. Meliodas in the center in particular looked incredibly strong. And he was handsome.

"Melio"-das, somehow, is kinda like my name, Pelliot.

"All right! I've made up my mind! My name from this day forth will be 'Pelliodas'!" shouted Pelliot, pumping his fist in the air.

"Young master?!"

With a sidelong glance at the adults bursting with laughter and the shocked Armando, Pelliot declared to his friends, "From this day forth, we are the Seven Deadly Sins."

Mera's eyes gleamed.

"Ooohh, that sounds like fun! If Pelliot is Captain Pelliodas, then who am I? Since I'm a girl, maybe Diane or Merlin?!"

"Let's go plan it out!"

Mera, Katts, and Tanto ran out of the shop with Pelliot. Thomas, who had been helping out in the shop, also ran out with them despite his mother's yells.

"Good grief...We're no match for young master Pelliot." The tipsy adults, who'd been drinking ale since daytime, laughed.

No matter how seriously and gravely the knight from the capital had appealed to them, for the villagers of Ordan, today's event just seemed like accompaniment for their beer that revived long-forgotten material to

populate their conversation.

“Mr. Armando, shouldn’t you go chasing off after them?” Thomas’ mother said with a bitter smile. She hadn’t been able to stop her son from going off after all.

“Hahaha...you’re right.”

Armando bobbed to the exit—then suddenly, halted and looked back at the bulletin board.

They were the portraits of his former friends. Some were just as he remembered them, other portraits were completely different.

He didn’t find it nostalgic. He didn’t have those kind of feelings.

He simply registered the information that even now, not a single one had been found.

Yet for those whose portraits are accurate likenesses, there is the possibility that their whereabouts are known. I need to be careful.

While he calmly thought this to himself, another idea drifted into his mind.

Perhaps the end is approaching.

He didn’t know whether that was a statement of probability he had deduced from objective phenomena, or whether it was something like what people call sentimentality.

If I were a real human...

If I had a soul, would I understand?

“What’s wrong?” one of the guests called, wondering why he was standing stock-still.

He returned his expression to Armando’s, and smiled. “No, nothing’s the matter. Well then, excuse me,” Armando said, bowing his head quickly.

Once again, he ran off after Pelliot and his friends with his silly, flapping gait.

Ending

“—And a little after that, the captain brought everyone to Ordan village. Everyone knows what happened next.”

With that, Gowther ended his story.

A few people listening, who had a suspicion as to the true identity of the Armor Giant in the story, cast their eyes down as though they were holding their breath. Seeming not to notice, however, the pink boar at their feet laughed hysterically: “That giant fish would have made a great meal!”

Hawk, a talking piglet who was the son of the giant boar that carried the tavern on its head, was always hungry.

“I don’t think it was fit for food, but for our Captain Leftovers, maybe it’d be all right?” Gowther was only giving his honest opinion, but everyone around him laughed, in a slightly strained manner.

Meliodas smiled cheerfully. “Pelliot, huh. That takes me back. I wonder how he’s doing.”

“I wasn’t able to meet him, I guess, since I was sick with a cold back then. I hope you can meet Pelliot again someday too, Gowther,” Elizabeth said.

Gowther tilted his head to the side, perplexed by her words.

“I wonder. When we parted, Pelliot said he would become a Holy Knight and capture me. Since I’m no longer a wanted man, that chance might be gone.”

“In that case, why don’t you go see him normally? Once this fight is over.” Elizabeth smiled.

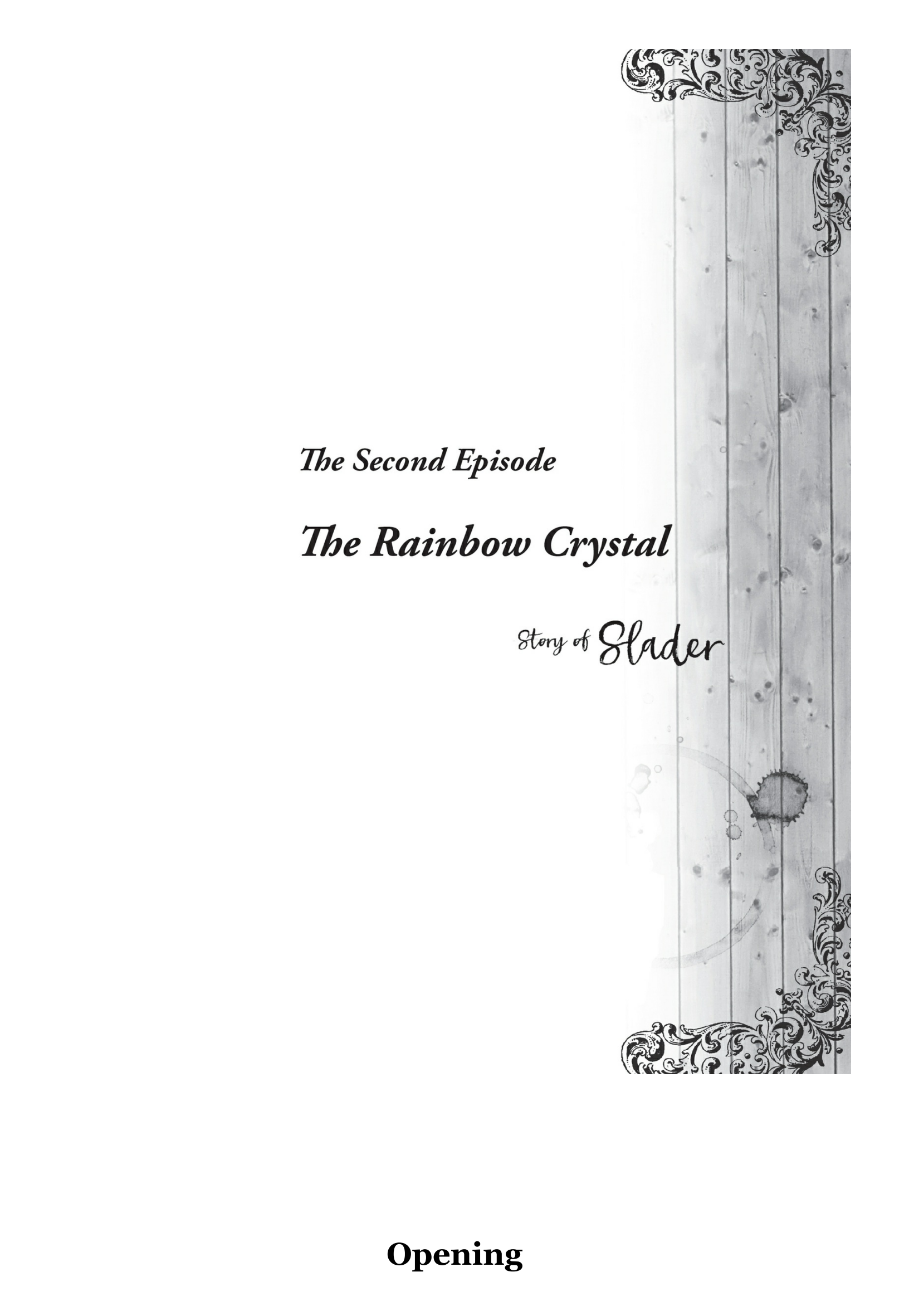
“That’s right! We should finish this quickly,” Arthur, the young boy with a strange cat atop his head, proposed sunnily.

“I’m compelled to tell you that possibility is rather low.”

As Gowther stated the truth matter-of-factly again, Merlin gave him an

exasperated look.

It seemed that their rainbow stories would continue for a while yet.



The Second Episode

The Rainbow Crystal

Story of Glader

Opening

“Huh. When Hendrickson came up with that gloomy look on his face, I thought maybe something was wrong, but everyone looks like they’re having a good time.”

A large man wearing a mask came down the stairs next to the counter in the back of the Boar Hat.

“But Gilthunder and Howzer aren’t around, are they?”

The man spoke in a gentle, feminine tone that didn’t suit his grim physique and frightening mask.

“They just headed out the entrance, saying that they were going to get some fresh air,” Hawk replied proudly.

Meliodas, sitting at a table with Elizabeth, looked back and smiled. “Let them have their space for a while. How’s Griaamore?”

“When I peeked in on him just now, he was fast asleep. Hendrickson is looking after him now.”

Meliodas held a mug out to the man. “Anyway, Slader. How about a beer with us?”

“Well, sure, why not.”

Arthur put a mug and three bottles of ale on a tray and brought them to where Slader had sat down next to Meliodas. “Here you are. Which would you like?”

“Thanks. What an honor, to have the King of Camelot pour my beer for me. The boy I knew way back when sure has grown up splendidly.”

“That’s right, we’ve met once before, haven’t we?” The young king, who had removed himself from his country to hone his skills, spoke unaffectedly. He poured ale into Slader’s mug and placed it in front of him.

As Slader removed his mask to drink, a slightly surprised gasp escaped from the group.

“So that’s what his face looks like...I thought it’d be scarier.” Elizabeth spoke without thinking, and then covered her mouth, embarrassed, most

likely afraid she'd been rude.

But Slader smiled at her and told her not to worry.

"It's not often we get to sit around and drink like this. You should tell us something interesting, too," Meliodas teased.

Slader tilted his head.

"Like what?"

No one, least of all Meliodas, commented on how Slader's voice and tone changed when he took off his mask. Among the Holy Knights, whose strength of will directly correlated to their magical power, it was not rare to meet people who changed various aspects of themselves with specialized garments or weapons.

"You saw that rainbow outside the window, right? So tell us a story about a rainbow."

"Rainbows...Okay, let me think." Slader narrowed his eyes a little and thought, but before long, he said he had one.

"It's not a real rainbow, but...I did think of a story just now. Oh, and it might be a little related to Princess Elizabeth, too."

"Oh? What could it be?" Elizabeth sat up straight in her seat.

Slader warned them not to expect it to be that amusing of a story. Then he began to reminisce about a mission he received from the King several years ago.

1

A shadowy figure ran down alleys submerged in darkness, stepping lightly so his footsteps would not be heard. In all probability it was a man. His clothes were all black, and the lower half of his face was covered with a cloth.

It was the bone-chilling hour right before dawn. Clouds spread over in

the sky, and there was no visible moon.

This neighborhood was the busiest place for crime in the capital of Liones.

Taverns and cafeterias lined up side by side on the large street ahead, but at this time of night, each shop was silent and had already closed for the night.

And since it was so late, of course there were no lights or signs of people in the back alleys, either.

The man pressed his back against the cold wall and looked around for signs of anyone in the vicinity. He took out a gold coin and intently flipped it with his thumb.

After the coin spun up in the air, he caught it on the back of his left hand, simultaneously pinning it down with the palm of his right.

He lifted up his right hand and checked the face of the coin.

The face was engraved with a crescent moon, shaped like a person's profile. In other words, the coin was heads.

"Okay, left it is."

He turned left at the T-intersection. As he'd predicted, there was no one in the back alley. Under his mask, the man let loose a fat and satisfied smile.

The coin he received from *that person* had always shown them the way. As long as he followed exactly what it said, they were never caught.

This time too—they had broken into the houses of the most preeminently rich merchants in the city and had managed to carry out a great deal of money. By the guidance of the Lucky Moon, his henchmen had probably already passed out of the capital city's walls.

The man came to another crossroads and flipped the coin again.

"This time, right."

The alley on his right, crammed with places of assignment, brothels,

and dubious fortunetellers, was a place where drifters often ended up. Or rather, one could say this neighborhood was the territory of scoundrels.

The man let down his guard a little and rounded the corner without concealing himself.

“...!!”

Then he saw who was there.

“Ugghh...Gus, chief, we’re sorry...”

Two large men lay on the side of the road, seemingly bound by rings of light.

Those were his henchmen, whom he thought had already escaped ages ago!

“Y-You guys, what happened?” Gus tightly grasped the coin in his pocket. “Did the Lucky Moon’s magic effect wear off?!”

“There is no moon in the dark before dawn.”

A young male voice called down from atop a nearby roof.

Taken aback, Gus raised his head—and without warning, the figure swooped down nimbly before his eyes.

“Bandit gang Lucky Moon. It seems like your moon-luck has just run out.”

He was a boy, short in stature, with long silver hair. But he was covered in thick armor and shouldered a sword that was taller than him.

His confident stance left no openings. His eyes were cold.

“Y-You’re not a knight...Are...are you a Holy Knight?” Gus inched backwards, retreating.

He didn’t have a prayer of beating a Holy Knight with magical powers. It was too bad about his minions, but his only option now was to save his own skin.

Gus turned around and tried to run back down the road he came from.

But it was already too late.

A beautiful lady knight wielding a flamberge smiled sweetly at him.

Scanning the vicinity, Gus saw more new figures on the rooftops.

On the left was a large armored man with his face covered by a strange round helmet.

On the right was a handsome man raising a bow shining with magic.

“Y-You guys...”

“We are an order of knights directly under the King’s command—Dawn Roar,” the boy declared coolly, walking up behind the flustered Gus.

“Daw...Dawn Roar?!”

The two henchmen, fallen and beaten, moaned. “Aren’t you guys that group of battle knights that specializes in killing...Why are you interested in petty thieves like us!”

“Beats me.” The lady knight curled her lips. “All we do is follow the orders of His Majesty the King. Even if the target is an insect, or a foreign brigade, if ordered to kill, we kill. If told to capture, we capture.”

“Good news for you ‘petty thieves.’ This time we weren’t ordered to kill. The order was to take you alive.” As the boy with the longsword spoke, the beautiful lady raised her right hand.

A shining band floated up from her fingertips. It was the same light that had captured Gus’ two henchmen.

“Gaghh.” Gus clenched his teeth. There was nowhere left to run.

But just then—

Unexpectedly, the door of a shabby tavern on the right swung open.

Out came a large man, drunk and unsteady on his feet, and a longhaired man supporting him with his arm.

The two of them staggered out into the alley as though they didn’t notice the tense scene.

“Come on, let’s get it together now.”

“Aaahh, Slay, you’re so nice. Is it okay if I take you back home with me?” the large man said in an infantile manner that didn’t match his frame and leaned against the longhaired man. For his part, the man called Slay, his cheeks slightly flushed, looked attentively up at the large man.

Male prostitutes?

An idea flashed through Gus’ mind.

With a sudden motion, he thrust the large man away and seized hold of Slay’s arm.

“Hey! If you don’t want this guy killed, let me go quietly!” Gus shouted, squeezing his arm around the neck of Slay, who’d staggered and fallen to his knees. “Hahah...looks like I still had a bit of moon-luck left.”

Even though they were knights specializing in assassinations under direct control of the king—or rather, precisely because of that—Dawn Roar had to be very careful regarding murders outside of their orders.

Above all else, if they let an innocent citizen die, they wouldn’t be able to show their faces to the famously compassionate King of Liones.

Just as Gus had suspected, the four members of the Dawn Roar slowly lowered their weapons.

But the expression on all their faces was discomfited—or perhaps sympathetic.

“...You really have run out of moon-luck,” the lady knight muttered.

But those words apparently didn’t make it to Gus’ ears.

Dragging Slay, Gus looked back at the young knight behind him. “Move out of the way!”

The boy eyed Gus with amused exasperation but obediently stepped aside.

Gus laughed loudly.

“Ha! Even those under direct orders of the king can’t do as they please,

hey. The story on the streets is that the king has been pretty sickly lately, too. When he dies, I could talk with my boss and get you set up with some other—”

He wasn't able to finish saying “work.”

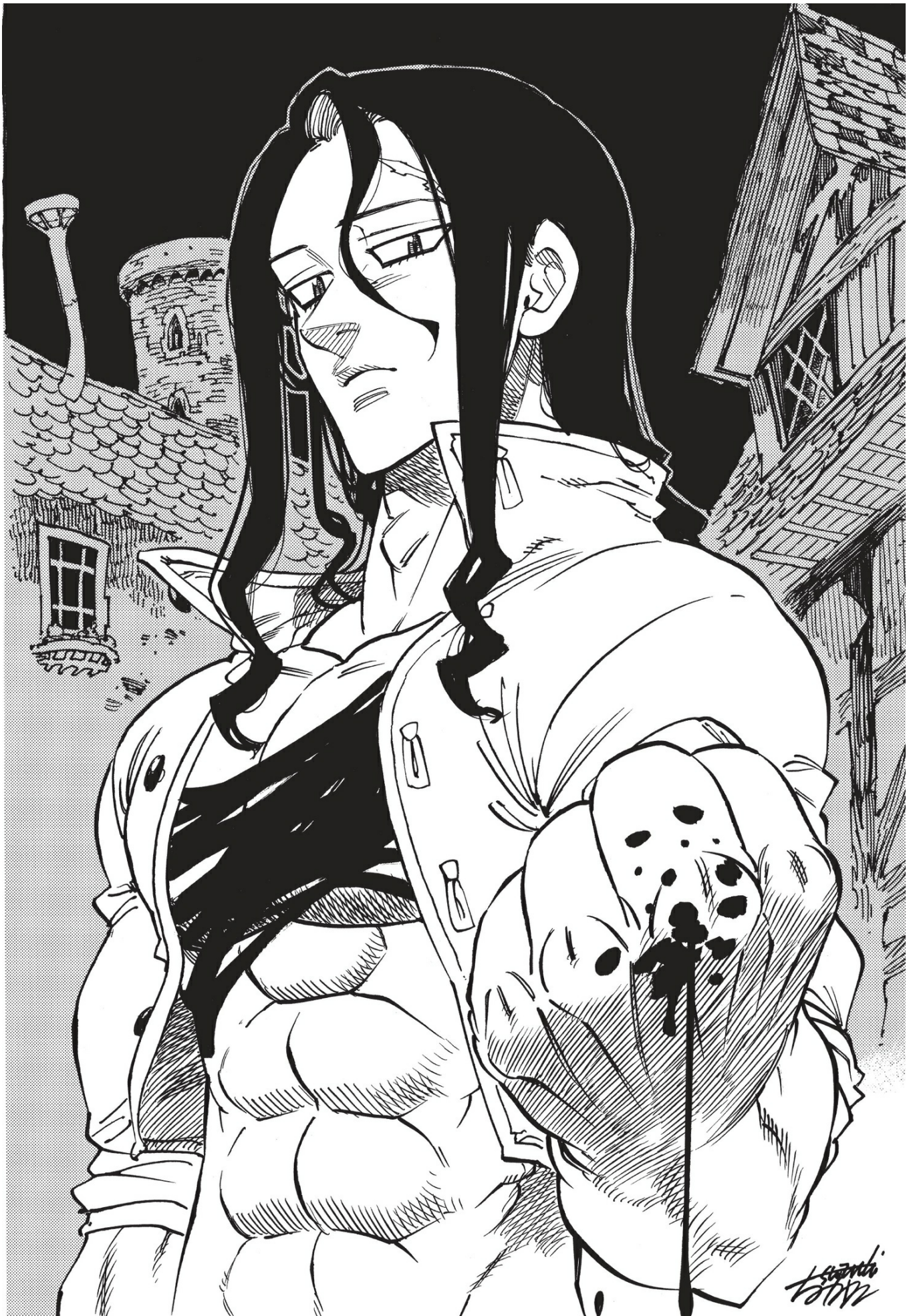
All of a sudden, it was as if a firework had been let off in front of his eyes.

“Guuugghhh...aaahh...” Gus fell to his knees on the spot, grabbing his nose.

Burning pain. Lukewarm liquid flowed down his palm. The taste of iron thickened in his mouth.

Not knowing what had happened, he raised his head and saw Slay whom he'd held trapped just a moment ago standing right in front of him. There was blood dripping from his fist. Gus finally understood that Slay had punched him.

“Even if the king himself forgives it, even if heaven forgives it, I won't forgive such language about the king,” Slay said coldly.



His icy gaze was completely different from earlier. The air grew tenser.

Gus even imagined the man's stature and physique had changed. *Was he always so big? I thought he was supposed to be a nice guy?*

He burst into a cold sweat. Overtaken by fear, Gus flailed his arms wildly.

But Slay dodged his assault easily, and slowly put an iron mask—where had he gotten it from?—over his own face.

“Makeup!”

With that strange yell, it seemed that Slay’s body grew even larger.

“W-What are you?” Gus cried, falling onto his backside.

“I am Slader, the captain of the Dawn Roar. Not that you have to remember that.”

Underneath the mask, his eyes narrowed. He seemed to be laughing.

“Ah, aaah...gotta get away...”

I gotta get away. While thinking that, Gus couldn’t move a single finger.

The terrible pressure radiating from Slay—Slader—stitched him to the spot.

“F-Forgive me...”

“Settle down. We aren’t going to kill you. Jillian.”

At Slader’s words, the lady knight once again raised her right hand. Her fingertips shone, and a band of light cast at Gus’ body constricted him with a terrible force.

“Uuaagghh...” Unable to withstand the pressure, Gus toppled over.

The large man in the helmet who had jumped down from the rooftop picked up the two fallen henchmen onto each of his shoulders.

Before Gus lost consciousness, the young knight walked up to him. However, he called out to Slader without looking at Gus.

“Sorry, Captain Slader. We’ve wasted your rare day off. We thought we would be enough for such small fries as these.”

“It’s all right, Simon. We’re janitors. It’s our job to keep the town clean.”

Slader winked at the boy, Simon. Jillian, the lady knight, shrugged.

“Really, Captain Slader? Your boyfriend seems to have run off.”

He looked around, and the man whom Gus had thrust aside earlier was no longer there. He must have been completely scared off and run away.

“Oh well. Guess that was to be expected.”

The man with the bow laughed. “Captain Slader has poor luck with men, too. Or rather, poor taste in men?”

“Thank you for your concern, Weinheidt. As soon as we’re done here, we’re withdrawing,” Slader said, picking up Gus by the arm like it was nothing at all.

2

“Commendations on the successful mission, everyone.”

Sitting in his bed in his pajamas, the luxuriantly bearded King Bartra thanked his knights for their hard work.

The five knights of the Dawn Roar kneeling before him bowed their heads solemnly.

The royal castle of Liones stood atop the low hill overlooking the capital. The king’s bedroom was on the top floor of the central tower.

This early in the morning, the castle was not yet crowded with the knights and ladies of the court in attendance. With the guards ordered to leave as well, the surroundings had fallen silent.

“The Lucky Moon coin—how nostalgic,” King Bartra said. In his fingers he held the coin with the crescent moon engraved on the face, which Slader had given to him. He squinted at it.

“With all due respect, was that coin originally Your Majesty’s?”

The king nodded in response to Slader’s question.

“That’s right. Or to be more precise, it was something that we gave to our former wife.”

“Her Majesty...the late Queen?” Jillian asked.

“Indeed. This coin was said to have only a small quantity of magic, but it would show you the way when you were lost. She seemed to use it only rarely...But, if she had used it back then, that monster may not have gotten her.” The king cast his eyes down sorrowfully.

Some ten years ago, Queen Caroline and some friends had gone to visit a spring outside the capital. It was there she was attacked by a monster and came to an untimely death.

“She went out without taking a single Holy Knight, and her group mostly consisted of ladies. It was a terrible situation. They couldn’t defend themselves. It was only some time after her remains had been brought back to the castle that we realized that several of the ornaments she had had on her were missing.”

“So she had the coin back then...”

“Yes. The monster that killed the queen was caught several years later, but we still didn’t find the lost objects. Someone probably picked up the things after they had been scattered among the bushes and concealed them. We put out an official notice to the jewelers and secondhand dealers, but we hadn’t found anything up until now.” The king abruptly suffered a fit of coughing. With one hand he motioned Slader, who had instinctively stood up, to stand back.

“We are fine. Do not worry.”

“But, sire, your complexion does not look well. Please rest. We will come again afterwards.”

“No. We are fine. It will subside soon.”

The king, who had become remarkably thin over the past year, straightened his back and resumed speaking.

“A few days ago our magic Vision revealed to us, ‘The Lucky Moon will

wane in the capital's dark before the dawn, and the Rainbow of Healing will shine on the unsightly.”

The king's magic Vision was, so to speak, the ability of foresight. From vague images and phrases, he could infer events that would occur close to him.

“Just as we predicted, the Dawn Roar captured the thieves that had been using the Lucky Moon. The only part left is the Rainbow of Healing.”

“Rainbow of Healing. Your Majesty has some idea as to its meaning?”

“Yes. We believe the foresight most likely refers to the Rainbow Crystal necklace that the queen always wore. It must have been lost back then.”

The king slowly passed his gaze around at Slader and each of the other members.

“We are not sure of the exact meaning. But our magic Vision seems to tell us that searching for the Rainbow Crystal will determine some other fate as well. We apologize for making you work so much, but please continue to lend us your strength.”

“We are unworthy of your kind words. Please, don't worry about us.” Slader bowed his head. “We have already obtained information from the boss of the thieves we captured as to who is controlling them behind the scenes.”

“Well, please let us hear it.” The king smiled contently.

Slader gave a slight bow and looked towards his subordinates waiting behind him. Weinheidt nodded and began to speak.

“Is Your Majesty familiar with an old castle at the tip of the peninsula, far to the south of here?”

3

Tethel awoke from the cold.

Sometime while he'd slept, his thin blanket had been taken by the boy sleeping next to him.

Tethel got out of bed, sniffing. The ten children packed into the narrow, musty room were sleeping as deeply on the cold stone floor as if they were dead.

In the distance, he could hear the familiar sound of waves.

High up on the wall, light seeped through a small hole just large enough for an arm to pass through. It seemed that dawn had already broken.

Tethel leaned on the bare stone wall while rubbing his thin, wasted arms.

“Hey! When are you going to stop sleeping! Get up, you brats!”

The thick iron door burst open violently, and a heavysset red-faced man stepped inside.

The children all sprang to their feet. Of course, Tethel stood up, too, and bowed his head to the man.

“Good morning, Mr. Chad!”

“Good news, brats, it's time for work!”

“Thank you!” the children chorused stiffly and followed Chad out of the room.

They passed through a narrow, damp hallway and climbed a set of stairs before their eyes were abruptly scorched by bright light. They had emerged into the courtyard of the old castle.

“...”

Three corpses lay fallen in the garden.

One was an unfamiliar young man with a pretty face. The other two had been criminals who had frequently visited the small castle.

They all clutched bloody weapons in their hands. Perhaps they had killed each other.

“Clean this up. You know the drill. Tear off their clothes and throw them

away, wash the weapons, and take them to the storehouse. Throw their corpses over the cliff out back into the ocean.”

“Understood.” The children nodded with vacant expressions and went right to work.

Tethel wasn't sure what kind of place he was in.

All he knew was that the master of this old castle, which stood atop a cliff on the coast, was called Lord Irving.

He also knew that, of the regular visitors to the castle, not a single one was honest.

There was a boisterous racket in the old castle almost every evening.

Night after night, it reverberated with flirtatious voices, laughter, and screams.

Sometimes there would also be the howls of fearsome beasts.

And the following morning, there would be corpses in the courtyard or in the reception hall.

Ever since Tethel was kidnapped several years ago, he had lived here and been forced to do dirty work.

“Tethel” wasn't even his real name. He had already forgotten the one that his parents had given him.

He had heard that in the language of some distant old country, Tethel meant *ugly*.

When he first saw Tethel, Lord Irving had crowed raucously: “What an ugly kid! Someday we might be able to sell him to a freak show.” And just like that, his nickname had stuck.

The corpses were already starting to stink, but by now all the children were used to it and no longer said anything.

They stripped the clothes from the corpses, their hands becoming stained with blood in the process. Then several of the children lifted the naked bodies and carried them to the back of the old castle.

Behind the castle there was a steep cliff, and beneath that was the ocean.

Shivering, Tethel and the others threw the corpses down into the water.

Someday, I'll be thrown off from here, too, he thought.

But he was already past feeling fear.

He wanted to find peace soon.

4

“Ah, I see. So that’s the old castle.”

The five members of the Dawn Roar advanced through the wilderness with their horses in a line and halted at a spot from where they could see the castle. The wind from the ocean blew against them and stirred up Slader’s long hair.

“It’s pretty run-down, huh. But from what I’ve heard, there’s been a noble family living over there for many years.”

Jillian narrowed her eyes at the armored knight Hugo’s words. “Rather than saying they *live* there, isn’t it that half of them are imprisoned?”

“I heard that the family has some royal blood.” Slader sighed. “The story goes that since he was a child, the nobleman there was self-indulgent, pleasure-loving, and fond of seeing blood. His parents and siblings abandoned him and his relatives didn’t know what to do with him either, so ultimately, he was placed in there. The king always heard the rumors and seemed to be troubled by them, but it’s difficult to deal with him because of his partial lineage.”

“I don’t care about that, so let’s hurry up and get this over with. Anyway, they’re probably just a bunch of deviant punks. Just like those Lucky Moon guys.” Simon unsheathed his longsword and swung it easily. In the distance, bushes were mowed down by some invisible force, and a rabbit hiding underneath them darted away, startled.

“It seems like someone came to greet us while you were talking.” Slader dismounted slowly.

Just as he said, they could see five horses heading their way along the road leading to the castle. And behind those they could see about a dozen marching figures. It was clear from one look that they were a group of bandits and thieves: Each one of them wielded a different set of armor and weapons.

“Hey hey, who the hell are you bastards?” bellowed a large man with a scar on his face. Brandishing a grim sickle, he had run out ahead of the others and approached them. Judging from his red face and blond hair, he might have been related to the savage northern tribes.

“Oh, not this type of act.” Slader grimaced under his mask. “He seems to be lacking in intelligence.”

“Not your type then?” Weinheidt laughed, and Jillian shrugged her shoulders atop her horse.

“Captain Slader likes the strong and gentle type. But as far as looks go, he has wide tastes, so he just appears to be fickle.”

“Fickle, that’s a bit harsh.” Though he said so, Slader didn’t seem particularly angry.

The large man brandished his sickle. “What the hell are you guys talking about so calmly over there! Idiots!”

“Well, I wouldn’t say we’re idiots. But we are here because we have business with the lord of the castle, so would you kindly take us to him?”

“Gahahaha,” the man guffawed. His companions on the horses behind him, and the men on foot who had finally caught up, also vulgarly opened their mouths and roared with laughter.

“You bunch of has-been knights? If you want to see Lord Irving, you have to get past us fir—”

The man didn’t finish what he was saying.

There was a flash of light, and in the next instant, a splash of blood.

All at once, the head of not just the man at the front, but of all five of the mounted men, flew off with a foolish popping noise and fell down onto the rocks.

“You understand now, right? Was that enough?” Simon grinned broadly.

The horses were left uninjured, but, spooked by the sudden change, scattered away, still carrying the bodies spurting blood like water fountains.

The men on foot stood staring, flabbergasted, but they finally seemed to understand their situation. About half of them hastily ran off, but the remaining half lost their temper and raised their weapons.

“For crying out loud...Simon, you’re too quick-tempered.” Slader released the reins of his horse. “Go. Eat some grass or something over there.”

The other four knights also alighted from their steeds. Their five horses formed an ordered line and ran back down along the way they had come.

“I hadn’t planned on stirring up trouble from the get-go, but...oh well.” Slader already grasped a greatsword with a saw-like blade. “Let’s settle this quickly.”

“Understood.”

The five bodies of Dawn Roar—an order of assassin knights under direct royal command—began to shine with magic.

5

Having finished disposing of the dead bodies, the exhausted Tethel and the others returned to the courtyard. There they found Rick, a thin young man who was always by the lord’s side.

The children’s eyes shone. That Rick had come out here meant that he might just show *it*.

As they expected, Rick smiled and announced, “Good job, everyone. I have a reward for you from the lord.”

The children raised a joyful cheer and followed him into the castle.

They walked down a dark corridor and went up the central stairs of the main hall.

The master was indifferent to the castle’s maintenance, and it had fallen into ruin, with broken things and piles of dust everywhere. There were cobwebs on the ceilings, and several of the portraits hung on the wall were so filthy with soot, their faces were indiscernible. The armor on display was all rusted.

But upon climbing to the top of the stairs and reaching the top floor of the tallest tower, the surroundings were completely transformed.

They were greeted with a properly polished hallway and a red carpet. The dignified wooden door in the far back was embossed with a beautiful rose design.

“All right, line up, everyone.”

Enthusiastically, everyone fell into two rows. Tethel took advantage of his small frame and succeeded in taking a position in line in front.

Rick looked around them with a self-important air—and then, offhandedly, he spoke as if he had just remembered: “That’s right, I almost forgot. The lord told me it was about time to cut down on the numbers of rag pickers as well.”

As he said so, from behind the rows, three kids who had still been standing on the stairs suddenly collapsed with a thud.

“...Huh?”

Tethel, who was out in front, didn’t understand what had happened.

One of the kids screamed.

Without their noticing, their caretaker, the red-faced Chad, stood behind them.

In his hand, he grasped a bloody blade.

There was a puddle of blood at his feet. And three children fallen on the ground.

Tethel gasped, but he didn't scream. The child who'd cried out had gotten killed, too, as an afterthought.

I don't want to die—if I die here, I won't get to touch it.

Tethel ground his teeth and hung his head.

“Well, I guess that's enough. All right, the rest of you head inside.”

Rick slowly opened the door.

The six children left passed through it without looking back.

A month had gone by since they last entered this room.

Covering the floor was a carpet so thick your feet sank into it. From the ceiling, an extravagant chandelier with innumerable bright candles illuminated the room.

There was a window on the back wall, but it was blocked off by thick curtains. In the center of the room was a large, richly ornamented sofa where a man lay stretched out.

He had almost no hair and was very overweight. His age was difficult to determine.

He probably couldn't even stand by himself anymore. Whenever he left this room, he was always carried in a litter.

This man was none other than Lord Irving, the master of the castle.

“Lord Irving, you seem to be doing well,” the children chorused just as they had been taught.

“Such dirty brats,” the lord said in a voice hoarse from alcohol. “All right...Here's your reward for completing a month's work.”

“Thank you very much!”

The lord sluggishly raised his plump hand, with rings bedecking each of

its fingers, and the scrawny Rick proceeded to the back of the room.

Rick tore off the black cloth covering *it* by the wall.

Aaahh.

A sigh leaked out from the children's mouths.

Like the rest, Tethel also stretched out his neck as if drawn toward *it*.

By the wall was a life-sized statue of a woman carved from marble, looking as though she were alive.

A crystal pendant about the size of Tethel's thumb hung around her neck.

The crystal glittered like a rainbow from the light peeking in through the window.

With a pompous air, Rick removed the pendant from the figure's neck and, holding the chain with both hands, came back to the children.

Tethel and his peers almost didn't breathe. They stared at the crystal, transfixed.

"All right...so then, you're first." Rick slowly approached the boy standing next to Tethel, leaned over, and placed the pendant around his neck.

"Thank you very much..." The boy spoke in a feeble voice, gripping the crystal tightly in his hand. Tethel let out a sigh.

I'm so jealous. I want to push him over and steal it right now.

But if I do that, I'll definitely be killed.

No. I don't want to die without touching it.

He ground his teeth again and stoically waited his turn.

"Okay, your time is up." Rick forced the boy, who'd closed his eyes in absorption, to open his hand and grabbed the pendant.

"Ah..."

Moaning once more, the boy momentarily attempted to resist, but he

gave up right away and crouched down on the spot.

“Next. Your turn.” Rick turned around to Tethel.

“Yes. Please.” His heart fluttering, Tethel stuck out his neck.

“Hmm, seems likes it’s rather noisy outside,” Lord Irving’s hoarse voice remarked, displeased.

Chad, who had been standing at the door leading to the exit, bowed and left. Rick, still clutching the pendant, also began walking over to the window.

“Aahhh...”

But it was my turn. Without thinking, Tethel had stretched his hand out in front of his chest. He withdrew it in a hurry.

At the window, Rick pulled back the thick, scarlet curtains slightly and tried to see the situation outside.

Then.

“—?!”

The glass and wooden frame of the window burst into pieces, and Rick toppled, face-up, convulsing with spasms.

Tethel and the other children promptly covered their mouths and stifled their screams.

“Wh-What’s wrong!” Lord Irving waved his hands around in a panic. The back of his sofa blocked the view from where he lay, and he couldn’t see in the direction of the window.

Tethel flew out from the middle of the paralyzed children and rushed over to Rick, fallen on the ground.

A single arrow was lodged in his chest.

Rick was no longer breathing.

Tethel forced open his hand and plucked the crystal free.

It was my turn, after all.

It was warm—it felt almost numbing.

His body was engulfed by vibrations that felt as though they could erase all his pain and suffering.

Tethel closed his eyes in rapture. *I want to go to sleep holding this forever. As long as I have this, everything is fine.*

He sunk to his knees on the spot, curling up his body and sinking further down to the floor— “Alley-oop.”

Unexpectedly, a shadow fell across the hole in the window.

A young man with a thin beard stuck his head in through the hole. He carried a large bow in his hand and had a quiver on his back. Without a doubt, this man was the archer.

“What’s this? Just a bunch of kids? Isn’t this the lord of the castle’s room?” The man looked around, bewildered, at the children standing stock still in the room.

“What’s this...What’s happened...Rick! Answer me!” Lord Irving, who still didn’t know what was happening, waved his hands.

“Ah, so you’re over there.”

The man kicked off the window frame and jumped into the center of the room.

Letting out feeble bleats of terror, the children clung to the wall. Still clutching the crystal, Tethel slipped in among them and leaned against the wall near the exit.

The other children were in a froth of panic, but Tethel remained calm.

I’ll see how this goes, and if there is an opening, I’ll make a run for it.

The man with the bow and arrow paid the children no attention. Instead, he walked around to the front of the sofa and looked down at Lord Irving.

“So, you must be Lord Irving.”

“And who are you?! How rude!”

The lord foamed at the mouth. However, ultimately he was only able to move his two arms.

“Do you realize that I’m a member of House Irving,” he shouted, “with an ancient and honorable lineage connected to the king?”

“Of course, I am fully aware of that.” The door creaked open and a hulking masked man entered the room. “We are the Dawn Roar, an order of knights directly serving the King of Liones. We are here upon King Bartra’s orders.”

“What...what did you say...” Irving turned deathly pale. Trying to escape, he flapped his short legs and struggled with his arms to get up. But he was unable to stand and instead tumbled clumsily from his sofa.

“Anyone! Is anyone there...Rick! Chad! Davis!”

“Unfortunately, there is no one left to hear you.” The door opened once more, and this time, a beautiful lady with honey-blond hair entered. She held a sword with a wavy blade dripping with blood.

“We dealt with them all,” she said. “You should have at least hired some men with some skill.”

“We are the king’s shadows. It is one of our duties to handle the underworld in the underworld, burying issues that should not be made public. Lord Irving, prepare yourself.”

The lord shrieked and frantically struggled on the floor. But his fat, ugly body only rolled over heavily.

“Somehow, this feels like we’re torturing him to death.” The masked man sighed.

“Want me to do it?” the archer asked, removing an arrow from his quiver.

But the masked man shook his head.

“From what I’ve seen, his body must place a considerable burden on his heart. If that’s the case, there’s no need for blades—this will do.”

There was a *bam* and the air became heavy.

Tethel felt as though he were being pinned down by an invisible hand, and his vision grew dark. *Clunk, clunk*—around him, he saw the other children fall down.

For a moment he thought he, too, would lose consciousness and bit his lip desperately to avoid it. *I'm not going to die here—I'm going to live, no matter what.*

“Oh...”

The masked man surveyed his surroundings.

“I thought I had shown some restraint, but I wonder if I caught them too. If so, I did an awful thing.”

At his feet, Lord Irving was no longer moving. His eyes were wide and blank, and his dark red tongue lolled loosely out of his mouth.

The lady and the man with the bow and arrows checked on each of the children.

“They’ve just lost consciousness.”

“They’re all so scrawny...This is so sad. They probably weren’t getting fed.”

Tethel waited, holding his breath. The two approached. The crystal in his hand was going to be discovered.

“Hey, all done here yet?”

The door opened for a third time, and a boy with silver hair came in from outside.

Instantly Tethel jumped to his feet and ran. He thrust aside the boy and scrambled out the door.

“Ah, wait!”

“Simon, catch him! That boy has something!” the lady’s voice traveled through the air.

Tethel ran desperately on trembling legs. *I don’t care what happens now. This crystal is mine. I’m never going to give it to anyone.* He

trampled over the bodies of the children killed earlier and sprinted down the stairs.

“I told you to wait.” The silver-haired boy jumped over Tethel’s head and stood in front, blocking his way. “Do you want to be cut down?”

A sword longer than he was tall gleamed in the boy’s hand.

6

Weinheidt descended the stairs with his bow on his shoulder. “You’ve got some guts. You’re the runt here, but you didn’t fall to Captain Slader’s Overpower and even tried to run.”

The child stood on the landing, Simon blocking his path ahead. Behind Simon, the armored knight Hugo was coming up from below.

Slader, who had followed Weinheidt down, leaned over the child. “What’s that you’re holding?”

He was a startlingly ugly child.

His left eyelid twitched—it must have been injured when he was very young—and his eyes looked mismatched in size. His nose was so flat it was only two holes in his face, and he had a huge mouth.

His clothes were so stained with dirt and filth that the original color was impossible to identify. He was so scrawny that his age was impossible to guess.

“Show me.”

Slader reached towards the child’s chest. But the child only shook his head and made no move to open his hand.

“I can feel a slight wave of magic.”

“Captain, that is the Rainbow Crystal.”

Jillian glided down the stairs.

“One of the children upstairs was muttering deliriously about a crystal. I think they were using its healing power to manipulate people. Multiple bands of thieves trafficking people and objects, and also killing...I feel like throwing up.”

“His Majesty would lament this.”

Slader shrugged his shoulders.

Then the child in front of him shouted, “Kill me! If you want this, kill me!”

“What are you saying?” asked Slader. “We’re not going to kill you. You were probably kidnapped and forced to do dirty work, right? C’mon now, hand over the Rainbow Crystal. Once you do that, you’ll be free.”

“I don’t want to! I’m not handing this over!” Shrinking, the child hugged the crystal even more tightly. “If you’re going to take it, you’ll have to take it from my dead body!”

“Captain Slader. This is becoming a nuisance. Why don’t we just dispose of him?” Simon recommended, the guard of his longsword rattling.

Slader narrowed his eyes and stared down at the child before letting out a gasp. “Are you a girl?”

“What?!” everyone gathered cried in spite of themselves.

The child was so very dirty and withered, not a single shred of girlishness was apparent.

“No, you’re wrong...I’m not a girl...” Even as the child said this her manner was that of a flustered child, and the truth was evident.

After a moment, still clutching the crystal, she started sobbing quietly.

“Good grief...What should we do?” Hugo asked in an embarrassed tone. Simon, seemingly giving up on the whole affair, said he would gather the horses and went down the stairs.

But Slader continued to stare at the girl.

Light from the small window fell onto the landing at a slant. The glow

made her dirty cheeks gleam.

A kidnapped child, forced to do dirty work.

Slader had been the same.

When you're living every day not knowing when you might be killed, you can't live without lying to yourself. I know that myself all too well.

“Hey, what’s your name?”

The girl rasped, “I’ve already forgotten my real name...Here, I was called Tethel.”

“Tethel, eh? That’s a strange name. Phew...” Slader exhaled. “Unfortunately, I have to tell you something about that crystal. I hear that someday it will lose its healing power.”

“Huh?” Surprised, Tethel raised her head and nervously loosened her hand.

Inside, the crystal was still shining like a rainbow.

“Apparently, in order to sustain its power, once every ten years or so it needs to be purified with a druid’s prayers. And I’ve heard that well more than ten years have passed since it last received those prayers. Not to mention, that crystal has been used so badly here, I wonder if its power might not disappear completely before long.”

“N-No way...” Shaking, Tethel gazed fervently at the crystal. “But then... what should I do now?”

Suddenly her eyes overflowed with tears again.

“Just kill me, then!” she shrieked. “I want to die! How could an ugly girl like me possibly live by myself after this?”

“Captain Slader.” Hugo gave a fleeting glance through his helmet. He was signaling that at that moment, he’d be able to pluck the crystal from Tethel’s hand easily.

Slader leaned over in front of Tethel, bending his large body slowly. “Killing you would be simple. But are you really okay with that?”

“...”

Slader continued, gazing into Tethel's eye under her twitching eyelid. “You must have thought about dying many times. And you had opportunities too, right? There's that cliff outside. But you didn't do it—why?”

“Because...If I worked hard, I would get to touch the crystal...”

“Are you sure that was the only reason?”

The girl had no reply.

Slader looked off into the distance. “A very long time ago, I was also in a situation very similar to yours. I didn't remember a single thing—not my real name, not my parents' faces, not even my own birthday. Many times, I was nearly killed, and many times, I also wanted to die...but never did. Many people died around me, but I didn't die.”



“ ... ”

“Just above us here, several children were killed. It would have been easy for you, too, to end up like them. But you’re alive.”

“Yes, but...”

“Do you really want to die? If you say that’s the only way, then I’ll kill you. In any way you like. I can split you in two with this greatsword. You could be pierced by arrows. Or would you like to be strangled?” As he spoke, Slader looked around at his friends in turn. As if in response, Weinheidt raised his bow, and Jillian created a ring of light at her fingertips. “It’ll hurt. No matter which you choose.”

“Ung...uuungh.” Finally, Tethel broke down sobbing, still holding the magical crystal.

Slader continued to speak, slowly bringing his hand in front of hers.

“I think you are lucky, and I think you are strong. You didn’t lose consciousness when I used Overpower, and you were even brave enough to try to run away when we were distracted. I admire that. As long as you have that, you’ll be able to keep on living.”

“But I’m so ugly!” Tethel snapped and raised her face.

It really was awful. Because she had been crying, snot dripped from her nose, and her eyelids were swollen so one of her eyes appeared merely as a slit.

“I remember some things from before I was kidnapped. I remember there wasn’t anyone who loved me!”

“All you have to do is hide your face.”

Slader grinned under his mask.

“There’s a lot of ways. You can wear a mask or use makeup. There are a lot of people who can say what they really think with their face covered more easily than when it’s exposed.”

“Are you talking about yourself?” Tethel looked up at Slader, wiping away her tears and snot with the back of her hands.

Slader winked. “Maybe.”

Tethel bit her lip and thought, but before long, she raised her trembling hand and placed the Rainbow Crystal in Slader’s palm.

“Thank you,” Slader said.

A small rainbow quickly rose up from the crystal.

The light formed a small arch, as if to leap over Tethel’s head, and disappeared.

“A rainbow...”

“The Rainbow of Healing will shine on the unsightly...Huh,” Slader murmured. Abruptly, he removed a rivet from the leather glove of his left hand.

This was no ordinary metal rivet, but a magical tool with runes on its front, called an Incantation Orb.

“Your Majesty, are you listening?” Slader spoke to the orb, and it began flashing.

“We hear you very well, Slader!”

King Bartra’s voice flowed out, its cadences matching the orb’s flickering. The orb had the power of Distant Communication.

“We have recovered the Rainbow Crystal.”

“Excellent work. You should return immediately.”

“Understood. In addition, we have five children in our custody who were forced to assist in the evil deeds here. Please permit us to bring them back to the capital.”

Tethel’s mouth gaped open with surprise.

“We understand. We shall order a high-speed coach from a village nearby to arrive as soon as possible,” King Bartra responded without hesitation, and the Distant Communication ended.

“All right,” Slader said. “It is time to withdraw. Hugo, check inside the castle one more time, just in case, and while you’re at it, secure a room we can rest in. Weinheidt, meet up with Simon and tell him what the king said, please. Jillian, wake the unconscious children upstairs.”

“Understood,” the Dawn Roar members assented.

At Slader's brisk orders, the group quickly dispersed. The captain turned to face Tethel, still dumbfounded at his feet.

"You go help Jillian, too, and explain things to your friends."

"Really? Is it really okay to trust you guys?" asked Tethel.

Slader nodded. "I hope today will be your new birthday. I'm sure that you have the divine protection of the rainbow."

As Slader said that, Tethel finally smiled.

Her face was as ugly as ever, but the smile was somehow charming, and reflexively, Slader found himself smiling back.

Ending

"So, what happened to the children?" Arthur inquired.

Slader answered while pulling down his mask over his face again.

"I heard that two of them remembered their names and the villages they lived in and were returned to their parents. The rest entered into service in knight houses and merchants' shops."

"And Tethel?" Elizabeth asked, choking up. Tethel's sorry story had moved her to tears.

"She had a predisposition for magical power, and there was talk about having her train to be a Holy Knight. But I heard she said that she didn't want to fight and left the capital to learn under a traveling sorcerer."

"Ah-ha," Merlin folded her arms and interjected with a noise of approval. "There are a lot of sorcerers who hide their faces. And some even make themselves look uglier, thinking it more fitting to a sorcerer's image. Her face wouldn't be anything to worry about."

"As though you're one to talk." Slader smiled wryly. However, the beautiful Merlin continued unperturbed.

"Both beauty and hideousness are only skin deep. Based on how you use

it, it can be a weapon or a weakness. People are not born equal, and many things are influenced by luck. However, as long as you have a chance, starting over is also quite human.”

“That’s so true...” Elizabeth, who was still crying, sniffled and nodded. “I don’t know my parents’ faces or where I was born, either. I might have led a miserable life just like Tethel’s. But my father and my older sister welcomed me as a real part of the family, and everyone in the kingdom treats me kindly as a member of the royal family, too. I’ve been so blessed...I better spend the rest of my life repaying that debt...”

“You’re doing enough already,” Meliodas said.

“Thank you very much, Sir Meliodas...Hyaah!”

“Don’t grope the Princess while saying nice things.” Slader emitted his Overpower, and Meliodas’ head was pressed against the table.

“B-By the way, what happened to the Rainbow Crystal? I’ve never seen it,” Elizabeth asked, her smile slightly strained.

“Since it had been used by evil people for so many years, it needs to be purified for months, years, before its power can be fully restored. His Majesty seems to have parted with it for now. It’s probably in the custody of a druid.”

“I see...” Elizabeth looked out the window into the distance.

The other day they had visited Istar, the sacred land of the druids. She recalled the druid leaders they had met there.

Though Elizabeth had heard she was descended from them, even now, she didn’t feel that she could be certain of anything.

“I’m sure it will be returned to you someday. It is a keepsake of your mother’s,” Slader comforted her.

“No, I’m all right. I’m sure there’s someone else who needs the power of that crystal. I myself need to be a healing force, too,” Elizabeth said, smiling.

The Third Episode

The Promised Rainbow

Story of King

Opening

The rainbow bridge was already disappearing from the sky.

Now all that they could make out was a faint trace of the rainbow's right foot above the mountain range in the distance.

“ ... ”

Projecting from the back of the Boar Hat's pointed roof was a long, narrow lookout tower. Sitting alone on its handrail was a boy.

His chestnut-colored hair stuck up wildly. His face looked slightly sleepy.

For a long time he had accompanied the friends now in the shop along their journeys. But at the moment, he seemed to really want to avoid being in the others' circle.

The boy glanced down at his feet, discontented.

Directly underneath the lookout tower where he was, hidden by the roof, two men had come out of the shop and sat side-by-side on the balcony that stuck out from the side of the shop. They were deep in discussion.

Distracted by the footsteps of the giant boar on the move, the boy couldn't hear their voices well. But he had taken great pains to look for a place with no people before settling on the lookout tower and couldn't help but find the two men irritating.

“They should just go back inside. Those jerks, Gilthunder and Howzer. They're always together anyway, what could they still have to talk about?” the boy muttered, and heard a mocking laugh in response.

“What is it, Helbram?”

The boy slid on a worn-out helmet sewn into the hood of his clothes. He looked out through the six narrow vertical slits of the grille, and another boy, who looked to be the same age as him, floated lightly in the sky in front of his eyes.

“Aren't you being a bit jealous, Harlequin?”

With the bright green hair, pointed ears, and thin wings growing out of

his back, no matter how you looked at him, he was a fairy.

His name was Helbram. In his current state he was able to exist only as a spirit and was inhabiting the helmet. He was Harlequin's closest friend.

"Who's jealous?" pouted Harlequin.

"It might be strange for me to say this, but those two have been through quite a lot in the past ten years, too. Isn't it understandable that they might want to exchange old grievances and feel sentimental? Though I guess it's not my place to talk..."

Harlequin sighed, and was quiet once more.

Over the past decade, among the many things that had happened in the Kingdom of Liones, there had been one particularly complex circumstance that could not be easily summed up.

Nearly everyone involved had made some terrible mistakes of their own and were tormented by a powerful sense of remorse.

Even so, that complicated series of events had in the end only been an omen for an unprecedented menace assailing the kingdom—or rather, all of Britannia.

So there wasn't any time to be caught up with resentment, sorrow, or regret. Now was the time they needed to join their forces and fight against the approaching threat.

"I know that," Harlequin muttered.

I know that. I know that, but...

No matter how I try, I can't get my feelings sorted out.

There was Hendrickson, who, possessed by a demon, had used Helbram's body and spirit as guinea pigs in some magical experiment that drove him to his death.

There were Meliodas and Merlin, who likely knew important—even vital—information about their circumstances, but never shared it.

And worst of all was Gowther, who toyed with the girl Harlequin held

dearest.

In his current mood, the boy could not possibly join with them and fight.

“For crying out loud...You’re so stubborn. You know you’ll regret it sooner or later, so why are you being so pig-headed?” Lightly swaying up and down, Helbram shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, shut up. You’re pretty okay with all this, considering you’re under the same roof as Hendrickson, the same guy who made you like that!”

“Well, it’s not that I’m okay with it, exactly, but...how should I put it. Since I’ve lost my body, intense pain and feelings like that have faded. And in any case, he seems to regret it, and it’s not like I’m blameless, either.” Helbram fluttered his hands.

Harlequin gave no response.

“Are you feeling down again? Did you remember? What happened two hundred years ago?”

“...Not really.”

“You’re such a terrible liar.” Helbram laughed. *“The rainbow is already disappearing. See, look, Harlequin.”*

Just as Helbram said, the rainbow they could still see a bit of a moment ago had lost its color and was disappearing.

“I always remember the Fairy Realm when I see a rainbow.”

At Helbram’s words, Harlequin narrowed his eyes too.

Just as Helbram said, rainbows often appeared in the Fairy Realm. The huge divine tree rising at its center would soak up fallen rain and release it back into the air, so usually a small rainbow would form among its branches.

Harlequin remembered.

Come to think of it, he also had a memory about a rainbow.

In the place where he used to live with *her*.

It seemed to have lasted forever and to appear only for an instant—a nostalgic memory.

Harlequin thought that was rather like a rainbow.

1

Northern Britannia: Deep within a remote forest, a late spring arrived.

The sound of the waterfall, heavier with the winter thaw, roared in the distance.

Animals that had been hibernating in the dirt and cavities in the trees were finally starting to emerge.

The forest was growing denser with greenery with each passing day. A small shadow flew through the verdant woods, lightly touching the glistening sunlight filtering through the trees.

It was a young fairy boy—Harlequin.

“Oh, these look good, too.” He flew down to the root of one of the trees and plucked a cluster of mushrooms. “This area has a lot of mushrooms.”

Looking around, he saw many types spreading their colorful caps in the shade of rocks and on rotten trees.

“As I thought, this area must always be damp because of the waterfall nearby. The ventilation here isn’t very good, either. It hasn’t been long since I last saw these shrubs, but they’re growing rampant...” Muttering to himself, he tossed mushrooms into the basket he held in his hand one-by-one.

“Okay, I think this should just about do it. And next...Oh, that’s right.”

He easily flew up, peeking into the empty dens in a few locations higher up in the forest, and found a small bird’s three newly laid eggs.

“I’m sorry.” Apologizing softly, Harlequin picked out one of the eggs.

The Fairy Clan ate neither eggs nor meat. It wasn’t that those foods

were inedible for them, but they didn't have the custom of cooking with fire, so it was normal not to eat those foods.

So why did Harlequin take the bird's egg?

"Harlequin!"

As he heard his name called, heavy, threatening footsteps made the forest trees shake.

From the other side of the grove appeared a giant.

She was still a child, the equivalent of a young human girl who was not yet ten years old. Dark brown hair hung down to her shoulders. Her clothes consisted only of scraps cobbled together from bearskins, which she wrapped around her body.

"Hey, Diane. How's it going?"

"I got lots!" The giant girl called Diane smiled triumphantly, then raised the three wild boars she was holding in her hand to show him. "How about you, Harlequin? What did you get?"

"These. But it's not much compared to you." Harlequin raised his basket with a smile of his own.

"Oooh, an egg, an egg! That'll taste great in the mushroom soup!" Even though for this giant girl, the small bird's egg was only the size of her pinky nail, she excitedly jumped up and down. Each time she jumped, the nearby trees shook.

"All right, let's eat!"

"Okay." Harlequin floated up into the air, following Diane, who had started walking off.

2

"Diane, has your fever gone down?"

They were atop a hill on the outskirts of the forest. A large boulder

covered the stump of a giant tree, which was rotted hollow. Inside the hollow was their den.

Harlequin had asked while they were eating, and Diane laughed, amused. “I’ve been over it for a while now. Harlequin, you’re such a worrywart. That was a while ago.”

Not long ago, Diane had had a high fever from a cold and been on the verge of death.

“Since the Fairy Clan doesn’t get sick, we don’t understand health very well.”

“Must be nice to not get sick. Then, do you not die?” Diane sunk her teeth into the whole roasted wild boar, chewing loudly.

“No, if we’re severely injured or something, we die.” Saying so, Harlequin’s expression turned brooding. “If we’re severely injured...we die.”

“What’s wrong?” Diane looked at him. Harlequin, surprised, forced a smile.

“Sorry. It’s nothing.”

“Did you remember something?”

“No, that’s not it. I *felt* like I was about to remember something, though. But now it’s gone.”

“If that’s the case, you might have died back then. I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Thanks.”

The two smiled at each other.

Once, Diane had rescued Harlequin when he was injured and fallen on the ground.

Both the Fairy Clan and the Giant Clan have very long lifespans, so their sense of days was different from humans’. Diane and Harlequin no longer accurately remembered how many years ago that had happened. It may have been decades ago—or even a century ago.

And from the shock of his fall, Harlequin had lost his memories.

All he could remember was that he was a member of the Fairy Clan, and that his name was Harlequin.

Sometimes he had dreams.

A giant tree stretching into the sky. Rainbows straddling the branches. The deep forest spreading out all around.

Blooming flowers. Mushrooms larger than he was tall. Ivy entwining with the trees.

And the small figures who flew among that scenery, flickering their colorful wings.

He was most likely seeing the Fairy Realm and his friends.

Yet, as befitting something that happens in a dream, every time he tried to grasp the scene, it vanished.

Harlequin actually didn't have wings. Even the clothes he wore was different from what the fairies in his dream wore. Harlequin's own attire was similar to what humans wore, but he had no idea as to why that might be.

But he felt that he was a fairy, as much as he felt he was male.

However, it wasn't just his own history that he was in the dark about.

He also didn't know much about Diane's past, though she lived with him.

The Giant Clan was said to be the first of the clans born in Britannia. They were known to have an affinity with the earth and wielded its power as their own. But as a result of their strong fighting spirit and tendency to seek out battle, they didn't often mingle with other races and lived secluded in their isolated villages—supposedly.

Though she was young, Diane wielded great magical power. By all rights she probably should have been training in a Giant Clan village as a potent prospective military asset. So Harlequin wondered what had driven her to live in this place all alone.

But he never asked.

He thought it might be a sad story.

He also thought it was unfair to ask someone about themselves when he couldn't talk about himself in return.

Right now, the two of us are living well just by ourselves. Isn't that good enough? he thought.

But there were times.

Sometimes, something ached in the depths of his heart.

Wasn't there something that I was supposed to do?

Is it okay to be living like this, thinking only about my own happiness?

Sometimes, a girl named Elaine would appear in his dreams.

She was a pretty young girl with bright blond hair, in a white dress.

Sometimes a boy named Helbram appeared too.

Elaine didn't have wings and Helbram did, but there was no mistake that they were both fairies.

He believed Elaine was his younger sister and Helbram was a close friend.

Elaine, sometimes angry and sometimes sad.

Helbram, always smiling.

Somehow, he had the feeling that those two had a lot to do with why he was here.

But when he tried to think about that more, the connection disappeared like a fog burning away.

3

One day, at dusk, Diane said to him, “Hey, hey, Harlequin, I just saw a human over there.”

“A human? It wasn’t that old hunter?” Harlequin had been cleaning the interior of their den. He turned his head as Diane entered.

The old hunter was a male human living in a cabin on the outskirts of the forest.

Diane had become acquainted with him when she assisted him with hunting once, and when she was struck with fever after coming down with a bad cold, he had taught them how to make medicine.

“Not him. It was a boy.”

“A boy? In a place like this?” Harlequin frowned.

It’s probably someone from that hunter’s family. I remember him saying he had a daughter—

“A boy, you said...About how old?”

“Hmm...I’m not sure. But from what I saw, he was a little bigger than you.”

“Where was he, and what was he doing?”

“Let’s see,” Diane answered happily. “I was taking a nap on Lone Cedar Hill and saw a boy walking by himself in the meadow across the river. He had a brown cloth wrapped around him and was wearing a hat that looked like this.” Diane gestured around her head and traced the shape of a wide-brimmed hat.

“A traveler, perhaps.”

That’s rare, thought Harlequin. We’ve lived here for a long time, but besides that hunter, we haven’t seen any other people.

“Diane, I tell you this all the time, but—”

“You can’t trust humans, right?” Diane laughed.

“Th-That’s right. That hunter is a good person, but there are very bad people among humans, too. So unless you know what kind of person they are, don’t do anything reckless.”

“Yeah, I know.” Diane nodded, smiling.

I’m still a little worried. But if it’s a traveler, he’s probably just passing through on his way somewhere else, thought Harlequin.

He won’t stay in a place like this with nothing at all for very long. However.

The next day, when Harlequin was heading into the forest to look for food— “Waaaaggghhhh!”

He heard a loud cry, and when he looked back, over the hill across from him, a cloud of dust was running towards him.

“D-Dusk bison!” Harlequin gasped.

It was a wild bull with huge horns.

Why was that bull, which was, as its name implied, mostly active at dusk, charging at full speed in the middle of the day?

“S-Save me!”

“That’s...”

A human boy was being chased by the bison.

“A brown cape. He must be that guy Diane saw.”

The boy didn’t have on a wide-brimmed hat, but he might’ve dropped it while he was running.

“Guess I have to do something...” Harlequin said to himself.

He didn’t really care whether a human lived or died, but if Diane came across his corpse, she’d be rather shocked.

Harlequin floated into the air, and then flew after the boy, who looked like he’d be caught in the dusk bison’s horns any second now.

With just a hair's breadth of time to spare, Harlequin grabbed the edge of the boy's cape and pulled him up into the air.

“...!!”

The dusk bison, whose target had disappeared right before its eyes, kept running down the hill at full speed, unable to change course or come to an abrupt stop.

Crash!

The bull smashed into a large boulder, making an enormous noise, and was immobilized. Harlequin spoke to the boy he was carrying.

“Isn't it great, you're safe now.”

“...”

“Hey, shouldn't you be saying something?”

“Gaahhhk, gaahhhk...”

“Oh!”

The cape was constricting the boy's throat, and he was about to pass out. Harlequin hurriedly flew down to the ground.

The fairy dropped the boy and waited as he held his throat and panted for air. When the boy finally regained his breath, he rose slowly.

“Th-Thank you...” He looked up at Harlequin and gave a feeble smile.

“You're welcome.”

“Excuse me, are you a fairy? Amazing. I've never seen one before.”

Harlequin was silent.

“Oh, that's right!” Remembering something, the boy felt around his waist on his right side. There was an item that looked like a stick wrapped in a red leather bag inserted into his belt. Reassuring himself it was still there, he sighed in relief.

“Thank goodness...I still have it...”

“...?” Harlequin didn't know what it was, but it didn't look like a sword.

The boy turned to Harlequin once more and quickly bowed his head.

“Really, thank you for saving me,” he said. “I leaned on what I thought was a boulder, but actually I was disturbing that bull’s nap time.”

“I don’t know what you’re doing in a place like this, but there are also bears and wolves around. You should leave soon. If you’re lost, there’s a family of hunters of living just beyond here, so you could ask them for directions.”

“Well, I have gotten myself lost, but...” The boy stood up and looked around, his hands on his waist. “Hey, you seem like you know a lot about this area. Would you perhaps happen to know about the Rainbow Waterfall?”

“The Rainbow Waterfall?” Harlequin tilted his head to the side. “There is a waterfall if you travel upstream along the river flowing by that—this hill. But I don’t know what its name is.”

“Oh, so it is that river. Does it end inside the forest?” The boy stood on tiptoe and cupped a hand over his brow.

“That’s right. It’s rather far back.”

“Hmm, is that so...I heard that a rainbow always sprouts from the top of the waterfall during the day.”

“Nah, that’s not true.” Harlequin recalled the waterfall’s appearance. “It’s deep within the forest, and there’s hardly any sunlight, so I’ve never seen a rainbow there.”

“I see...” The boy hung his head. “Is that the only waterfall around these parts?”

“As far as I know.”

The boy contemplated some more, but before long he straightened his cape and checked the stick at his waist once again.

“Thank you. I’m going to go see it myself after all.”

“You’re really going? It’s pretty far. On human legs.”

“Yes...But finding a forest with fairies in it has given me hope. Thank you very much.” The boy smiled. Then he turned his back to Harlequin and walked off.

Harlequin watched the boy’s back until it passed out of sight.

Is it okay to let him go? Or should I have removed him...

...Remove?

He surprised himself with that word.

Come to think of it, though, in his dream, wasn’t he always arguing with his younger sister Elaine about something like protecting the forest, or this and that about handling intruders?

But try as he might, he couldn’t remember anything specific.

The boy was still climbing the grass-covered hill, wandering here and there.

Well, I guess it’s okay...He doesn’t look like such a bad human.

He didn’t seem to have any magical power or to be carrying a weapon. It’s not like a boy can do much on his own.

For now, I’ll just tell Diane not to go near the waterfall for a bit.

Harlequin nodded to himself, then flew off to look for food once again.

4

Three days passed.

While Harlequin was flying through the forest as he always did, he heard a faint, unfamiliar noise.

A bird?

He first thought that the resonant *pi~pi~* was a bird’s call, but quickly realized that it wasn’t.

The sound formed into a velvety melody.

“A flute...”

Yes. The sound of a flute.

A musical instrument that humans play.

Harlequin flew through the grove, drawn towards the sound.

“Ah.”

He could hear running water over the melody of the flute.

Of course. The waterfall is just beyond here. The one the boy attacked by the dusk bison said he was heading for.

Harlequin approached the waterfall quietly, hiding between tree trunks.

It had not rained much the summer before, so the waterfall’s flow was less than usual, but still water flew down, creating a violent white spray.

The boy sat on a large boulder nearby.

He had a side-blown flute pressed to his lips. It was made from some kind of white material, bone or horn, and he played the song wholeheartedly.

I see, in the bag around his waist was that flute.

It was a beautiful song.

It seemed cheery, but sometimes also felt very lonely.

*Human flutes can make beautiful sounds like this...*Harlequin thought to himself. *It’s so different from the flute from then.*

—“Then?”

Harlequin was surprised.

When was “then”?

A scene suddenly rose up in his mind.

Helbram smiling, holding a small flute made from hollowed-out wood.

“Since you do it too, Helbram won’t give up his bad habits either.”

Elaine looked like she was in a bad mood.

Harlequin held a similar flute in hand.

That was right.

He'd picked up a flute used to ward off beasts, which some human had dropped.

When he came back to the Fairy Realm, Helbram was carrying a similar flute, too.

Elaine became angry with them, accusing them of having gone off to play in the human world again— His flute from that time made a strange *pui-hyoh-roh-roh* noise when he blew into it.

Without his noticing, Harlequin had started crying.

I don't know. I don't know when that memory was or what it was about.

I don't know anything, so why am I sad?

Perhaps the song the boy was playing was too beautiful.

The musical scale smoothly rose and fell.

The refrain held steady through the changes in key.

A melody by turns cheerful, playful, and heartrending.

The melody repeated itself, modulating its tone a little each time—it was causing him to remember something—

Abruptly, the song broke off and Harlequin returned to his senses.

He looked up to see the boy sitting atop the boulder, unchanged.

He seemed to be merely gazing at the basin under the waterfall, with his flute still pressed to his mouth.

Harlequin thought about calling out to him, but something stopped him. Instead he began to leave.

However—

“Is that it?!”

A voice he knew very well broke in.

Downstream from the waterfall, a thicket split with a crunch and Diane’s face peeked through.

“Aaahhh! A giant!” the boy shouted.

“Hey, I want to hear more! Keep playing!” Diane tried to climb over the thicket and get closer. Overcome with surprise, the boy tried to flee. But his leg slipped— “Aaahhh!”

He tumbled headfirst into the basin.

5

“Come on, hey, wake up!”

“Waahh, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!”

Harlequin and Diane had hauled the boy back to land as soon as he fell in. He shouldn’t have swallowed too much water, but he didn’t rouse easily.

While they waited for him to come to, they built a fire nearby and made a soup from mushrooms found in the vicinity and birds and eggs that Diane gathered. As if lured to consciousness by the smell, the boy finally opened his eyes.

“Where am...Oh, you’re that guy from...”

“Sorry for scaring you.” As Diane peered in from his side, the boy screamed again.

“It’s all right,” Harlequin said. “She’s my friend. She’s also the one who

picked you out of the waterfall.”

“Oh, really...Thank you. Ah—” The boy turned pale. “Flute! My flute!”

“Your flute’s over there. You flung it away when you fell. It was next to the boulder.” Harlequin jerked his chin, indicating the boy’s side.

The boy picked up his flute and smiled, relieved. At that moment, his stomach growled loudly.

“How about we have some food?” Harlequin brusquely poured some of the contents of the pot into a wooden bowl and held it out to the boy.

“Th-Thank you. First time in days since I’ve had real food...” The boy crinkled his eyes happily, blowing on the soup a couple of times before beginning to slurp it down happily.

“That flute is very important to you,” Diane remarked, smiling, and the boy gave an embarrassed nod.

“Now you’ve rescued me twice. My name is Terrence. Please call me Terry.”

“I’m Diane.”

“And I’m Harlequin. From the looks of you, you haven’t had proper food since we met last time. I told you it’d be impossible for a human to go all the way.”

As he was about to tell the boy to hurry and go back home, Diane interrupted.

“Hey, Terry. That song you were playing, was that all of it? Why did you come here? What are you doing?”

“Diane...” Harlequin gave her a troubled glance.

But Terry only laughed a little sadly without looking particularly offended.

“Up until a short while ago, I was part of a traveling troupe.”

Gripping his flute, Terry started talking.

“I was told that my parents died when I was only an infant, and that I

was raised as part of the troupe ever since. The person who looked after me the most was a man called Marius the Flutist. He told me I had a talent for the flute and taught me many things.”

Terry cast down his eyes with a *but*.

“Everything went well for a while. But as the songs I learned became more and more difficult, as you might expect, practice became more and more of a hassle. So often I’d slip off behind Marius’ back to go and play. But one day, when I returned to the troupe’s tent...”

“When you returned?”

Terry took a deep breath, and continued with difficulty. “Everyone was dead.”

“Dead?”

Harlequin and Diane looked at each other.

“You said they were dead? Were they killed by bandits or something?” Harlequin asked. Terry quietly shook his head.

“I don’t know...Usually, a traveling troupe is summoned by kings or nobility for celebrations or festivals and goes from town to town. But because they tend to visit places that favor them every year, the route is generally set, and troupes try to avoid dangerous areas as much as they can. That day, we were camping at a spot we were familiar with, near the riverbank along a large main road that we took every year.”

Telling them how he’d grown more irritated with Marius’ nagging year by year, Terry was moved to tears.

“I took a nap in the forest nearby, and when I returned to the tent, everyone, every single person was cut down. And nothing valuable had been taken, and it didn’t look as if any of the women or children were assaulted, they were just...just killed.”

“How terrible,” Diane murmured, covering her mouth.

“Later I heard that area had similar occurrences before. I think there must have been someone lurking around who just likes to kill.”

“For crying out loud, humans are really worthless.” Harlequin let out a sigh. “Only humans do things like kill others of their own race for no reason.”

“I guess so.” Terry gave a humorless laugh. He continued, “When I got back, Marius was just barely breathing. This is the flute that he gave me in his last moments.” He gently caressed his precious white flute.

“So that song you were playing earlier, did you learn it from him?” Diane asked, and Terry nodded.

“It’s called *The Promised Rainbow*. When Marius was young, he once saw a small waterfall that always had a rainbow across it. He said he wrote the song then.”

Terry looked off in the distance with another but.

“Because I was always slacking off, I can’t remember the final phrase no matter how hard I try. I know I learned it once, but I can’t recall the melody.”

“So, you came to see the Rainbow Waterfall?” Harlequin asked. Terry nodded again.

“That’s right. If I remember correctly, he said it was around here. But I guess this isn’t the place after all.” The boy looked in the direction of the waterfall that he had fallen into earlier. The sun had already gone down and in the dark, of course, he couldn’t see any rainbows.

“There are other waterfalls around. You should give up on this one already and go look someplace else,” Harlequin said curtly.

Terry smiled.

“Yeah. You’re right...I feel a bit better now that I’ve come this far.”

“Wait, are you leaving?” Diane looked a bit disconsolate. “I wanted to hear you play the flute again.”

“Diane, don’t be unreasonable. This isn’t a place for humans.”

“I see.” The giant hung her head, dejected. Harlequin sighed again, as though to say, *Good grief*.

“Well, your clothes haven’t dried yet, and the sun has already set, so why not set out tomorrow?”

“Yes, that sounds good.” Terry nodded in assent, and Diane clapped her hands happily.

“Great! Then let’s hear some more of that flute!”

“Okay. What do you want to hear?”

Terry, smiling, put his flute up to his lips.

6

“Looks like she fell asleep.” Terry glanced back at Harlequin with an amused expression.

It was near dawn. Their surroundings were hushed but for the sound of the waterfall.

Diane, who had been singing and clapping her hands to the rhythm of Terry’s flute just a short while ago, lay with a giant boulder for a pillow. She breathed gently with an air of utter satisfaction.

“Why don’t you get some sleep, too? When the sun comes up, I’ll escort you out of the forest.” Harlequin tossed a small stick onto the fire, and Terry nodded.

“Thank you. It’s too bad I didn’t get to see the Rainbow Waterfall, but it was nice to meet you guys.”

Copying Harlequin, Terry tossed a small stick onto the fire.

“So you and Diane have been here for a long time, just the two of you?”

“Yeah.”

“How nice. I’ve heard that fairies and giants have really long lifespans. And you can use magic, so even if some beast or evil human came by, you could handle it.”

At those words, Harlequin felt a prick in the depths of his heart. But he couldn't identify what it was.

"You're such a weak human, why would you come to a dangerous place like this?" Though Harlequin usually wasn't interested in humans, this point was bothering him.

Terry hung his head and gazed at the fire. "I sincerely regret that I was such a lazy oaf. I never thought that Marius and I would part so suddenly. I thought that tomorrow would continue just the same as today, so if I slacked off a bit, I'd be able to make it up later."

"..."

"Ultimately, I never got to ask Marius why he titled that song *The Promised Rainbow*. But as he was dying, I promised him I would learn to play it."

"So, you still plan on finding your waterfall?"

"Yes." Terry nodded. "Ah...It's already dawn."

The two of them looked up. Through the openings in the grove above them, the bits of sky they could see were already purplish bright, and the stars were gone.

"I'll get a little sleep before I head out. Thank you, Harlequin." Saying so, Terry lay down, using his arm for a pillow.

About to throw a small stick onto the fire, Harlequin halted his hand and let out a small sigh. "A promised song, huh..."

Something pricked at his heart again.

"When that time comes, you have to stop me! You, my true friend!"

Helbram...

The boy, always smiling in my dreams, who called me a true friend.

I feel as though I made a promise to him. Did I keep it?

I don't know. I can't remember. It always fades away.

This uneasiness just keeps growing.

It's like a dark stain welling up in my chest.

I just don't understand.

"I guess I'll sleep for a bit, too." Shaking his head, Harlequin lay down where he was.

Diane's deep breaths and Terry's shallow ones formed a strange rhythm.

As soon as Harlequin closed his eyes, he began to doze.

Suddenly, it seemed to grow bright in front of his eyes, and he woke up.

Bands of light shone through the grove. The morning sun had risen.

"...?"

The golden bands stretched out towards the waterfall.

"Ah!" Harlequin jumped to his feet.

A rainbow. There was a rainbow.

The waterfall, which until yesterday had been shielded by the thick grove, now had sunlight hitting it directly—and wasn't that a rainbow, arcing directly over the water's spray!

"I got it! Yesterday Diane smashed those trees!"

She'd forced her way through to hear Terry's flute and created a path for the sunlight to flow.

"Terry!" cried Harlequin. "Get up! There's a rainbow. A rainbow!"

"Huh?" Shaken awake by the fairy, Terry jumped up too. "Ah, it's true! Ah..."

But the rainbow soon started to disappear.

The sun had moved, and light no longer filtered through the cracks in the trees.

"Aaaahh, look, it's gone."

"Hold on." Harlequin lightly flew up into the air around the branches to come out on top of the waterfall and looked down at the basin from

above.

“Terry. Was that guy, Marius, kind of old?”

“Huh? Yes, he was. I think he was already near ninety when he died.”

“I see. It’s as I thought.” Harlequin had finally figured it out.

“Terry, this waterfall here is what that man called the Rainbow Waterfall after all.”

“What?”

“That’s right. I remember it now, too. A long time ago, when we started to live around here, it wasn’t so dense with trees. The grove was thinner, and it was bright and sunlit.”

“Oh, I see! Since the trees grew so much, the grove became darker and rainbows stopped forming?”

“What’s going on?” mumbled Diane, getting up and rubbing her eyes.

Terry rushed over to her in a fever pitch of excitement and cried, “Diane! Help me out! Tear down all the trees around here.”

“What?!”

“Wait, wait! Not all of them!” Harlequin butted in. “This area has definitely grown a bit too thick, so I think that thinning it out a little would be good for the forest. But cutting all the trees down would be too much. Terry, you just want to see a rainbow, right? If that’s the case, I’ll...” *ask the forest properly*, he nearly said but stopped, stunned.

“I’m going to ask...the forest?”

He slowly scanned his surroundings.

...

He looked around once again.

He clearly understood what he had to do.

He knew which trees to cut, and how much the sun would shine through.

He knew which trees were approaching the end of their lifespan, and which saplings were going to grow.

He knew which branches to prune to make the trees stronger, and which roots that, severed, would kill the tree.

Why?

Is this the power of fairies?

“How are we supposed to protect the forest without you?”

Elaine’s voice echoed close to his ear.

“Protect—the forest?”

“Harlequin, what’s the matter?” Diane asked, looking concerned.

He came back to his senses. “S-Sorry. Anyway, I think we can see a rainbow without having to knock over all of the trees. Terry, wait over there.”

Saying so, he turned back to Diane. “Diane, will you pull out and knock down the trees as I tell you to? Then the sun will shine through, and we can see a rainbow.”

“Yeah!” Diane sprung up.

Afterwards, Diane followed Harlequin’s directions in pulling up several of the trees in the area.

“It’s true!” she said. “The trees you point out are all easy to pull out.”

“The insides of their roots and trunks are rotted,” he explained.

Each time a tree was taken out, the surroundings became a little brighter. The sun shone on damp surfaces covered with moss and fungi, drying them out. A breeze passed through, and the still air started moving.



“It feels so good!” Diane stretched widely. “Hey, will flowers bloom too?!”

“They’ll bloom. Look!”

Harlequin pointed at grass that was sprouting right before their eyes.

“Ahhh...a rainbow.”

Before long, the sun shone brightly onto the waterfall—and a rainbow came alive.

“It’s just like before. Maybe we won’t get to see the rainbow all the time, but this way, we should be able to keep it for at least a little while.”

“That’s for sure...Ah, it’s so beautiful.” Terry sat on a large boulder beside the waterfall and gazed at the rainbow arching through the bright spray.

He put his flute to his mouth.

And he started to play that song: *The Promised Rainbow*.

The musical scale smoothly rose and fell.

The refrain held steady through the changes in key.

A melody by turns cheerful, playful, and heartrending.

The melody repeated itself, modulating its tone a little each time— It represented a rainbow.

“So beautiful...” Diane murmured.

Before long, the song approached the part where it had broken off earlier.

Terry’s fingers danced upon the flute without faltering—and he spun out the next phrase without hesitation.

The notes ran up the clef in a ringing fanfare.

A quick melody. A bewilderingly changing tempo.

This probably represented the cascading waterfall.

Then the rainbow refrain repeated once again.

Modulating its tone and repeating many times over—

“When that time comes, you have to stop me! You, my true friend!”

“How are we supposed to protect the forest without you?”

“Don’t go, big brother. Don’t leave me alone.”

The song that carried Terry’s regret, determination, sorrow, and hope pricked at Harlequin’s heart.

It was triggering something: the fairy’s own, similar regret and sorrow.

Then, too quickly, the melody ended.

“I played it. I remembered...” Terry muttered, and tears overflowed from his eyes. “Marius...I did it...”

“Yay, amazing, ama~zing!” Diane clapped.

“Harlequin, wasn’t that amazing? Right, Harlequin? Hmm?”

Looking down, Diane gasped.

“Why are you crying, Harlequin?”

“What?” Harlequin hurriedly raised the back of his hand to his cheek. Tears had escaped from his eyes without him realizing it.

Not wanting Terry to notice, he hastily wiped his face with his sleeve.

Terry sat on top of the boulder as though in a daze. But before long he stood up and looked back at the two of them cheerily.

“Thank you,” he said. “It’s all thanks to you guys.”

“No. It’s because you tried so hard,” Diane told him, smiling.

But Harlequin couldn’t muster a smile of his own. He felt like there was something stuck in his chest.

As though, if he listened to the song even more, he would remember a terrible truth.

“Hey, Terry, play it again!” Diane pled, but Harlequin interjected— “No, don’t!”

“Why not?” the giant asked, surprised.

Harlequin had surprised himself, too, but he shook his head to hide his confusion. “Nah...It’s just, well...You feel satisfied now, right? So...”

“Yes, you’re right. Thank you. I’ll be going now.”

Terry stared wistfully at the rainbow still spanning the waterfall, restored the flute to its leather bag, and thrust it into his belt on his waist.

“Well then,” Diane said, “I’ll show you out of the forest! I can do that at least, right, Harlequin?”

“S-Sure. I mean, I’ll go, too.”

“Yay!” Diane held out her hand to Terry happily.

From his viewpoint in the sky, Harlequin looked down at Terry dozing off on Diane’s shoulder as she walked to the forest’s edge. He thought to himself: *What do I want to do?*

Do I want to keep living with Diane forever?

Do I want to recover the past I can’t remember?

I don’t know. I want both.

Terry will return to the human world.

As for us. What will become of us?

In the quiet forest with the sunlight filtering through the trees, only Diane’s footsteps made a sound.

7

After that, the months continued to pass.

The time the two of them spent together, which they thought would never change.

Then, that day abruptly arrived.

“Hey, hey! Let’s go visit the old hunter’s cabin today. It’s been a long time!” Diane proposed one early afternoon.

“Sure, let’s go,” Harlequin agreed. “We haven’t seen him in a while.”

Heading to the hunter’s home, the two saw something surprising.

In the valley where the hunter’s cabin had stood isolated and alone, surrounded by trees, a small village had been erected.

The wild-growing brush had been cleared, and fields had been tilled around the village.

Smoke from cooking fires rose from the chimneys of many of the small homes, and children ran about playing.

The old hunter was no longer there.

Two men who looked just like him came out to greet them, saying they were his grandchildren and telling them that he had passed away long ago. They explained that they had settled in this village and that they operated a general store, purchasing goods from merchants who sometimes came by.

As Harlequin followed the path back home with Diane, he recalled the scene he had just seen.

The numerous children. They each had their own parents and homes.

Children that looked just like their fathers. Children that resembled their mothers. And maybe, children who took after their grandparents.

A fence of roses encircled the village. Before he knew it, fields had been cleared for crops, and vegetables and wheat were being blown by the wind.

Just how much time has passed?

It feels like just the other day to me.

That hunter taught us how to make mountain bird soup, and medicine

to lower a fever.

Perhaps that boy who played the flute the other day is no longer of this world either.

During those endless, unchanging days we spent in the forest, they, with their magic-less small bodies and hands, laboriously cleared the forest, cultivated fields, built houses, and multiplied little by little—

“Diane, did you know? Humans are a race with short lifespans, so I heard they have a thing called *marriage*, where two unrelated people come together and bind their lives to each other,” Harlequin said.

After a pause, Diane sighed and mumbled, “I’m so jealous.”

“Huh? Of humans with their short lifespans?”

Diane didn’t respond. Looking through the gaps in the trees, she asked, sounding lonely: “Harlequin, do you love me?”

Harlequin turned red at the sudden question. But in a weak voice he confirmed, *Yes*.

“Recently you told me you’d grant me one wish for anything, right?”

“Huh? Yes, I did say that.”

It had been a childish promise from when they played tag. But Diane, slightly blushing, fixed her eyes on Harlequin.

“Well then...please love me forever.”

As if embarrassed by the speechless Harlequin, Diane turned on her heels and ran off into the forest.

Harlequin shouted hastily at her retreating back.

“I...I promise! I’ll always love you, I’ll always be by your side!”

Diane stood still for a moment. But without looking back, she reminded him, “You just have to love me forever!”

Somehow, Harlequin felt bothered by her choice of words.

He was just about to ask her why, when his ear caught an unfamiliar

sound.

“What’s this noise?”

Harlequin looked through the trees in the direction of the disturbance.

The noise was clattering...Clattering...A horse-drawn cart was passing along a distant road.

“A cart? They did tell us that merchants come, didn’t they...”

He could see many cloth bags tied to the cart. There were daily necessities such as pots, tableware, and pans, as well as farming tools such as hoes and spades, and even swords.

The wooden wheels advanced down the poorly built mountain road.

Merchant. Carts. Goods.

That noise. Those words. That echoing.

Hanging in the air, Harlequin watched the cart absentmindedly until it was out of sight.

That was the trigger.

As if the final piece of the puzzle had fallen into place, that night, he remembered everything.

An elderly warrior, his left eye hidden by an eye patch, was laying waste to the fairies.

There were fairies suspended, covered in blood, or fallen flat on the ground.

And there was Helbram.

“He must be after our wings!! Some humans believe our wings can be used for potions of longevity...”

“Fairy King!! At this rate they’ll—”

Harlequin shook free from the nightmare and jumped to his feet,

completely dumbfounded.

How could I forget something so important?

“I...was the king...of the fairies living near the Sacred Tree of the Fairy Realm.”

That was it. He was no ordinary fairy, he was the one and only Fairy King.

“I had many friends...and my one and only little sister...”

Elaine in her white dress—the organized little sister who always scolded him.

“She watched over the Fairy King’s Forest, with the Sacred Tree that connected this world and the Fairy Realm.”

The huge Sacred Tree pierced the heavens, and its roots spread across the land. Rainbows arched among its branches. The hollows of its trunk were like looking glasses, reflecting occurrences from distant worlds.

“But...My friend who had an interest in humans was deceived by an evil one, and taken away.”

That’s right. The eccentric human lover, Helbram. Always a cheerful optimist.

He laughed and said that humans had various “ways of thinking” and “cultures” that fairies lacked.

When I told him that if he was too trusting, someday he’d have a bad run-in with humans, he laughed and said:

“When that time comes, you have to stop me! You, my true friend!”

And sure enough, he was deceived and caught by an evil man pretending to be a peddler.

“I...came to this world...chasing after him.”

I ignored Elaine who tried to stop me.

“How are we supposed to protect the forest without you?”

“Don’t go, big brother. Don’t leave me by myself.”

Just how many centuries ago was that?

However, though Harlequin had flown out of the Fairy Realm to rescue Helbram, he did not make it in time.

His friends were killed, with their backs cut up and their wings torn off.

The old warrior with the eye patch snuck up from behind while Harlequin was trying to rouse a barely-breathing fairy cradled in his arms.

Taken by surprise and cut down, Harlequin fell into the river. In the end, Diane picked him up on the shore downstream.

At that time, he lost all his memories.

“...I...”

Harlequin clenched his fist.

I wasn’t able to save Helbram or my friends, and I abandoned the Fairy Realm and the Fairy King’s Forest.

All this time, I was living here by myself, happily having forgotten everything.

There’s no going back from what happened.

Then.

Suddenly, a violent boom that sounded like an explosion came from outside. Harlequin and Diane rushed out of their den.

“Aaahh! Is that a fire?”

They could see the sky beyond the hill turning a bright red.

“The village is over there.”

That human village they had just gone to visit in the afternoon was burning.

“Let’s go! Quickly!” urged Diane.

“It’s too dangerous!” Harlequin shut her down. “Diane, you wait here!!”

His expression wasn’t his usual slightly foolish one.

It was the expression of the Fairy King, who protected the Fairy King’s Forest with his immense magical power, whom humans feared.

“I’ll go alone. When it’s over, I’ll—”

When this is over.

I have to go back to the Fairy Realm.

In order to fulfill my duties as the Fairy King.

But before he could speak, Diane gave a sad, lonely little smile.

“Go find your friends and return to them.”

Harlequin froze momentarily.

“I promise! I’ll always love you, I’ll always be by your side!!”

“You just have to love me forever!”

He remembered their previous exchange.

Perhaps Diane had already known.

That was why she interrupted him when he said he’d stay at her side.

She’d realized it was a promise he couldn’t keep.

Harlequin looked back at her.

Diane was smiling. But her large purple eyes were brimming with tears.

Who needs me the most?

Harlequin clearly knew who that was.

“I’ll come back to you. I promise,” he said gently.

At those words, the tears started falling out of Diane’s eyes at last.

“Okay!”

Harlequin flew towards the village, leaving behind Diane, who nodded and waved her hand.

“How awful!!”

Flying over the forest and hills at full speed, Harlequin witnessed a terrible sight.

During the day, the small houses had smoke from cooking fires rising from their chimneys. Now the homes were all engulfed in flames.

The roads and squares were covered in corpses.

“Everyone was cut down from behind...”

Even the children who had looked up at Harlequin and Diane so curiously.

And the women who had stretched out of their windows and smiled at them.

“...!”

One of the grandchildren of the old hunter was also lying on the ground. Harlequin flew down to his side and lifted him up in his arms.

“...”

He wasn’t breathing anymore. Harlequin clenched his fist. “It’s just like that time...”

The terrible scene made Harlequin distinctly remember that other time.

Yes, back then, too, my friends were all cut down from behind, with slashes on their back, and fallen on the ground—

“It can’t be that man with the eye patch! No. It’s been several hundred years since then. There’s no way a human could still be alive...”

A burning house blocked the road, with the flames engulfing corpses as well.

The smell of blood was overwhelmed by the smell of things burning.

It was then that a single *living* person appeared from within the fire and

thick swirling clouds of smoke.

The flames reflected off his blood-spattered armor. The sword in his right hand wavered in the rising heat.

Harlequin looked at his face—and found himself speechless.

A dull metal-plated eye patch. Coarse hair mixed with white. A distinctive helmet in his left hand.

“How! How...are you still alive?!”

There was no doubt. This was the old knight who killed his fairy friends—and Helbram!

But the old knight also stiffened when he saw Harlequin.

“That’s my line!” He was clearly flustered. “Back then, I sensed your presence and knew that you’d come to rescue me. But since that villain took you by surprise, I thought he killed you...I took him by surprise and killed him in revenge.”

“No, it can’t be, that way of talking—” Harlequin remembered that characteristic accent. “Helbram!!”

Without a doubt, this was Helbram, the friend he thought had been killed by the old man!

“Why do you look like that?!”

As though in response to Harlequin’s cry, the old knight changed forms in an instant.

Now Harlequin saw the unforgettable figure of his old friend, the form that had appeared in his dreams so often: a young fairy with bright green hair and amber eyes.

Helbram quietly cast his eyes down and spoke.

“I stayed in that form so I wouldn’t forget my hatred of humans.”

He spoke of his hate so clearly.

“So you did this to these people?!”

Harlequin couldn't believe it. He couldn't believe his friendly, cheerfully smiling friend could commit such a violent deed.

“Didn't you like humans?!”

“Yes. I did,” Helbram muttered sadly. “Even though they could be weak or foolish, humans lived their short lives to the fullest. They were dear to me...But humans deceived our fairy friends and killed them. Without even a real reason—”

The smell of smoke choked the air. There was the clattering noise of burnt roof tiles falling.

Helbram gave a thin smile.

“They said that fairy wings would make good money...heh. What is money, anyway?”

Out of all the things that humans wanted, money was the thing that fairies understood the least. Yet, for it, humans sometimes even gave up other things that were important to them, one after another.

“They told me, ‘We'll give this stuff to your friends.’ Just because I brought our friends out to see this rare...On account of my bringing our friends to see some rare-looking *rubbish*...everyone...was killed...”

A shining drop fell from his lowered eyes.

“Harlequin, can you picture it?”

Reflecting the red flames, it looked like a drop of blood.

“Right in front of your eyes, one by one, your friends getting their wings ripped off!! He even took his time, going slowly...saying he didn't want to damage the wings!”

With a forced smile, Helbram mimicked the brutal snapping and cracking sound effects.

“Even now, the sound, the screams of all my friends are stuck in my head!”

Harlequin bit his lip.

What a horrible sight that must have been.

Helbram loved humans, and believed in them.

His trust was betrayed in the cruelest fashion—and he'd lost his mind.

Harlequin remembered something the boy with the flute had told him: the rumors of a madman who just roamed around killing people.

That was it. It must have been Helbram.

His old friend's voice was warped with loud laughter.

He screamed, his face strained with tears: "I hate the humans! I've been killing them for five hundred years!"

The updraft caused by the heat brought winds, and the air rushing into the valley reverberated like a beast's howl.

Harlequin cast down his eyes.

Helbram, I'm sorry.

Five hundred years.

Did I live with Diane, so carefree, for so long?

And all that time, my friend was walking in hell, killing the humans he'd loved.

"But it's not enough. I won't stop until I've wiped out every last human on earth!"

Harlequin, however, heard a different meaning in Helbram's declaration.

I don't want to kill anymore. Somebody stop me—

"When that time comes, you have to stop me! You, my true friend!"

Yes. Just as he had promised then.

Beside him, part of the rose fence had escaped the fire. Harlequin broke off a white rose at its stem.

He slowly held it aloft, imbuing it with the magical power of the Fairy King.

Helbram was still laughing and crying. With a prayer, Harlequin flung the rose at his chest.

The white rose blossomed into a red flower there. Everything was stained a deep red, and the fairy boy fell to the ground.

Helbram, I am truly sorry.

His fallen friend's face looked peaceful.

Harlequin squatted down beside him. Placing his forehead upon Helbram's cooling one, he let his tears spill out.

They fell onto Helbram's face and mixed with his.

I have to atone for this.

Crying, Harlequin swore to himself.

I have to atone for the sin of not seeing his suffering...for letting my friend suffer for a long time...for such a long time.

With his sleeve, Harlequin wiped Helbram's soiled face clean, and then stood up.

He slowly looked around.

The fire had burned down all the houses and was starting to die down. As if the heat had mustered them, clouds thickened in the sky. The full moon, visible shortly before, had disappeared. Rain began to fall.

It was almost dawn.

When the sun rose, the clouds would disperse, and a rainbow would no doubt appear.

Harlequin suddenly remembered Terrence's words.

"I sincerely regret that I was such a lazy oaf. I thought that tomorrow would continue just the same as today, so if I slacked off a bit, I'd be able

to make it up later.”

That was really true, Harlequin thought.

There's no guarantee that tomorrow will be like today.

There's no guarantee that you can always fulfill your promises.

He gently floated up into the sky.

He could already see the clouds breaking, and a hint of sunrise in the eastern sky.

In the distance, he could see some humans on horses heading towards him, coming from across the hills.

They were wearing armor. Most likely they were knights dispatched from a nearby kingdom. Someone must have reported the fire and explosions, and they were coming to investigate.

It's my duty to tell them about what happened here and to bear this sin in Helbram's place.

As a lazy Fairy King, Harlequin thought that, at least, was his duty.

I'm sorry, Diane. I wasn't able to keep my promise to you.

Harlequin resolved to at least erase her memories so that her feelings wouldn't be so hurt.

The sun started to shine.

The forest and plains where the two of them had lived spread out under Harlequin's feet.

There's probably a rainbow at the waterfall today, too.

Harlequin found Diane sitting, clutching her knees, in front of their home.

Holding back his tears, he flew down to her.

Ending

The sun approached the foot of the western mountains in the west, and a cool breeze sprung up.

In the wake of the vanished rainbow, a white cloud rose up.

“What’s that song’s name?”

Harlequin was startled by Helbram’s question.

“Was I singing?”

“Well, humming.”

Harlequin gulped and went red.

“It’s okay. Nobody heard you anyway. Those two below couldn’t hear you. You were drowned out by this boar’s footsteps.”

Hawk Mama’s footfalls continued shaking the earth rhythmically like the beating of a drum.

*“It’s a song I learned from a human child, long ago. It’s called *The Promised Rainbow*.”*

Harlequin didn’t mention that Helbram had killed that boy’s family and friends. More than anything else, Harlequin thought there was no point in telling him because the present Helbram probably knew everything already.

“Perhaps it means that promises are fleeting, like rainbows.”

“Perhaps.” Helbram smiled. *“But rainbows will always appear again, in another time, in another place, won’t they? So even if a promise seems to have been broken, you’ll have any number of chances to keep it all over again elsewhere. Just like how you saved me so many times.”*

“Helbram...” Harlequin’s voice choked up.

Through the slits in his helmet, he could see Helbram floating lightly in the sky, his arms folded behind his head, as carefree as ever.

“Aah, I can see the first star of the night.”

Just as he said, in the gaps of the clouds in the western sky twinkled a bright star.

Before long, the two of them heard the entrance to the Boar Hat open from below, and Hawk's shrill voice sounded up to them.

"Hey, we're about to get to the next village! Time to prepare to open shop, so you guys help, too!"

"What a pig. So full of himself."

Howzer's disgusted voice. Gilthunder's low laughter.

Before long, the door closed, and it was quiet again.



“ ... ”

Harlequin gave a loud sigh.

Will the day come when I can forgive those people that I can't right

now?

And will the day come when I can fulfill, in a different form, the promise that I wasn't able to keep?

Diane...

Once again, Harlequin made a vow in the depths of his heart to the girl whose whereabouts he didn't know.

Just like a rainbow appears over and over, I'll keep remembering you again and again.

I'm sure that someday I'll be able to fulfill my promise to you.

I'm sure I'll return to you.

Little by little, Hawk Mama slowed her steps and the lights came on inside the Boar Hat.

Far off yet, down the gently sloping road, the lights of the human village flickered.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Shuka Matsuda briefly worked in design at an ad firm before turning to what she was meant to do. A writing role for the videogame franchise *Far East of Eden* marked her debut as a storyteller. These days she is known for her children's books and YA novels.

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First published in Japan in 2016 by Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

Publication rights for this English edition arranged through Kodansha Ltd., Tokyo.

English language version produced by Vertical, Inc.

Art by Nakaba Suzuki.

Published by Vertical, Inc., New York, 2018

Originally published in Japanese as *Shosetsu Nanatsu no Taizai—Gaiden*
—*Nanairo no Tsuioku*.

This is a work of fiction.

Ebook ISBN 9781945054945

Vertical, Inc.

451 Park Avenue South

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